



Washington State Fusion Center INFOCUS

WEDNESDAY — 16 FEB 2022



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Events, Opportunities

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HEADLINE	02/14 Workers: drugs on transit a daily hazard
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/transportation/drugs-on-buses-have-become-an-everyday-hazard-seattle-area-transit-workers-say/

Bus and train operators say so many people are smoking drugs on Seattle-area transit that the fumes, and volatile behavior, create a hazardous work environment that discourages ridership.

King County Metro Transit workers filed 44 security incident reports regarding drug use in 2019, then 73 in 2020 and an unprecedented 398 reports in 2021, by Metro's count. The database reflects both a real increase and more reporting, officials say.

Amalgamated Transit Union Local 587, representing 4,305 active members, says stronger enforcement is needed, including more police and security guards, with greater authority to remove people. Besides toxic smoke, union officials said crews who maintain transit stops have been punched, spat upon and threatened. Many incidents don't show up in official reports, union leaders say.

Narcotics smoking aboard transit took hold last summer, and now surpasses needles and marijuana in driver complaints. Since then, at least six operators asked to stop driving midshift, and 14 specifically mentioned feeling headaches, dizziness or irritated breathing.

Typically, users will flick a lighter beneath a piece of aluminum foil, which heats the fentanyl, meth, heroin or mixture on top, where the smoke is sucked through a straw. Air circulation systems carry the haze forward, and some transit vehicles don't have windows that open.

"It smells like burnt peanut butter, mixed with brake fluid," said King County Metro Transit operator Erik Christensen, who reported six incidents since October and collects field dispatches from fellow drivers.

The union endorsed Bruce Harrell for mayor, who ran on a theme of law and order, and has asked state lawmakers for help.

"We're after the criminal activity, the smoking drugs, the assaults, the deterioration of transit," said Local 587 Vice President Cory Rigtrup. "The solution is to restore transit, make it welcoming, bring back passengers."

The stakes for the region's transportation system are greater here than other cities. [Seattle transit ridership rose about 50%](#) in the 2010s, by far the highest U.S. rate, to carry 750,000 daily passengers pre-pandemic, and [46% of central-city commuters](#). Residents pay the nation's highest transit taxes, to agencies that spend [roughly \\$1,200 yearly per capita](#). Ridership and [fare income](#) dropped more than half in the pandemic.

Metro faces a chicken-and-egg situation, Rigtrup said, where a post-pandemic return of more commuters would help deter drug users.

Local 587 is expected to consolidate workers' reports into a complaint with the state Department of Labor & Industries alleging workplace hazards, said L&I spokesperson Dina Lorraine.

Metro General Manager Terry White agrees smoking drugs on transit is a greater problem lately.

"Absolutely, we are a microcosm of what's happening regionally and nationally," White said.

Metro plans to release a new [Safety, Security and Fare Enforcement Initiative](#) this week, developed using surveys and comments from 8,000 people. White hopes to improve conduct on transit but also show compassion, especially to riders who lack shelter.

"We should not be coming down on a totally punitive side," White said. "We should figure out how we serve community. Hopefully we'll be putting some things in place, where you'll see more police on a coach." White also anticipates new outreach and alternatives for homeless passengers, something he considers a mostly different issue from the smoked-narcotics trend.

Drug use in Denver caused ATU Local 1001 there to declare Denver [Union Station](#) “a lawless hellhole” in December. A television newscast aired a [worker’s video](#) of defiant users. Police made arrests, and the transit agency closed restrooms after finding traces of fentanyl.

The loitering soon returned, said Local 1001 President Lance Longenbohn. Managers granted one train operator a medical leave this month, since drug smoke reaching her control cab triggered asthma, he said.

“People are smoking it on the buses and trains, in the station. We’re trying to bring back riders. People get on our vehicles and our stations and that’s what they see. It’s not a very attractive transit experience,” Longenbohn said.

De-escalation team proposed

On paper, merely eating a bag of potato chips violates [Metro rules of rider conduct](#). In reality, King County shied away from enforcement activity, to reduce COVID-19 contagion, and in response to the Minneapolis police murder of George Floyd that sparked racial justice protests. In Seattle, late 2010s data showed [disproportionate punishment of Black passengers](#) for fare evasion, and zero public benefits from frequently ticketing [homeless riders](#). Politicians often want to avoid enforcement tactics that might provoke confrontations.

King County [suspended fare enforcement in 2020](#). Sound Transit light rail, also operated by Metro, converted from military-clad inspectors to educational “fare ambassadors” who contact only 2% of riders.

However, Metro is increasing its previous 30 security officers to a total of 70 by summer, training a few each week, said Neil Crosier, security superintendent. County Executive Dow Constantine will announce a new fare enforcement policy this month, an aide said.

The unarmed Securitas guards aren’t legally authorized to remove people for misconduct, except imminent safety risk to passengers or guards, Crosier said. They mainly help customers with directions, how to pay, and where to find free Metro-supplied masks, he said.

Fare inspectors are legally empowered to evict nonpayers, if county officials reinstitute fare enforcement. Fare enforcement personnel, both here and nationally, are considered by transit agencies to be a front line of surveillance to deter or report misconduct.

Seattle police officers don’t patrol county transit vehicles but will react to serious assaults. Drug use anywhere, including sidewalks and bus stops downtown, is a “lower priority than violent crime, and we spend a lot of our time right now responding to violent crime,” said Detective Patrick Michaud.

Christensen says, “We just want them off the bus. Just get them off the bus, so we can drive.”

Washington state Rep. Jamila Taylor, D-Federal Way, said she will request \$500,000 in state funds to employ outreach staff she calls “de-escalators,” on the A Line serving International Boulevard South. They would have expertise in addiction, mental health or housing, under contract with community organizations, modeled on the [CAHOOTS crisis intervention team](#) in Eugene, Oregon.

“If a person needs services, or needs to be removed from the bus, they can handle it, rather than the bus driver. The bus driver can focus on getting the riders safely to and from,” Taylor said. Police support would be needed, but not as the first option, she said.

Plumes on Aurora

During a routine Friday evening commute, a group piled into the back of a half-full E Line bus, leaving Third Avenue and Pike Street. Someone lit their foil just beyond Aurora Bridge. A fidgety man shuffled down the aisle screaming, “I just want to love and protect you! I don’t want them to hurt me!” and was let out near Green Lake.

Another metallic-tinged plume pushed forward, where a grumbling passenger opened the window. When the bus reached Shoreline, a third and thicker cloud billowed forth. Wisps swirled around a young man who paused from nonstop rapping. The operator stopped the bus, walked back, told him to turn off his audio player. He complied. "Have a good night!" the driver wished everybody stepping off, drugged or sober.

After the bus returned downtown, around 8:20 p.m., breezes of smoke from the sidewalks around busy Pine Street drifted north toward passengers waiting at the Third and Virginia transfer stop.

Incident reports tell more stories.

Aug. 19: "Continued drug use and filling the cabin with secondhand smoke causing myself to get a migraine and slight nausea. Pulled bus into the zone 152nd and Aurora. Opened all doors and informed the riders I am unable to continue on route due to illness."

Nov. 7: "I noticed a burning peanut butter like smell. I suspected that somebody was smoking drugs (other than marijuana or tobacco) on the train. Upon arrival at University of Washington Station, I looked out of the door window in the cab to see a passenger in the seat behind my cab smoking pills off of aluminum foil."

Nov. 25: A man is arrested after reportedly smoking drugs from a foil, then hitting another bus passenger on the head and back with a taped broom handle.

Nov. 27: A man threw rocks that shattered bus windows in Ballard, after an operator told him to leave for smoking drugs.

Bus routes can be alluring places to smoke, Christensen said. "It's warm, it's out of the environment, it's easy. The wind doesn't blow the flame out."

Local 587 President Ken Price portrayed teleworking Metro executives and politicians as oblivious to front-line conditions.

"Like cyber bullies they sit behind their computers and discipline you for not de-escalating predators, drug addicted people or thugs. Things they would never accept in their own workspace," he wrote in a monthly newsletter.

White replied that he understands union members' frustration. The white-collar staff are following Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidance by teleworking, he said. [A lifelong Metro customer](#) and employee, White said he still rides buses and trains daily between South King County and Pioneer Square, where he's noticed used foils and odors, but not witnessed drugs ignited.

County Councilmember Rod Dembowski, chair of the Transportation, Economy and Environment Committee, said he's scheduled a Tuesday morning hearing on "COVID impacts." Union representatives will speak.

Dembowski emphasized, "Management makes the operational decisions, and many of the policy calls as well."

Sound Transit has strung yellow plastic chains to block the seats near control cabs of its light-rail trains, following incidents of operators being overcome by toxic smoke, said spokesperson John Gallagher. He said Suraj Shetty, the new operations director, took a night ride and found "pretty disgusting stuff that's happening on the trains."

	Previously, CEO Peter Rogoff warned the transit board about biohazards and vandalism after ridership imploded in 2020. At the next transit board meeting Feb. 24, they'll hear about the smoked drugs phenomenon, too.
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HEADLINE	02/16 Is Ukraine situation cooling?
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/16/briefing/russia-ukraine-putin-biden.html
GIST	<p>Vladimir Putin may still order an invasion of Ukraine, as President Biden said yesterday. Putin has long been obsessed with Ukraine, viewing it as part of Russia's immediate orbit. And more than 150,000 Russian troops remain ready to pour over the border if Putin gives the order.</p> <p>Yet Putin and his top deputies have taken several high-profile steps over the past 48 hours that seem to signal a de-escalation of the crisis. Why? Nobody knows for sure because Putin often shrouds his motives and his plans. But with help from our colleagues in Washington, Moscow and Kyiv, today's newsletter looks at three possible explanations.</p> <p>1. Always been a bluff</p> <p>Putin, after meeting with Chancellor Olaf Scholz of Germany yesterday, said that Russia had decided "to partially pull back troops" from the border. That announcement followed other signs of de-escalation since Monday, including encouraging comments from Russia's top diplomatic officials about negotiations.</p> <p>There does not seem to be any immediate cause for Moscow's change in tone, which suggests that perhaps Putin never planned to invade, despite the huge buildup of troops. "Putin might have been bluffing all along," Edward Wong, a Times correspondent in Washington, told me, "so seeking a diplomatic resolution where he can wring guarantees, however small, from Ukraine, the United States and Western European nations might be the best outcome for him."</p> <p>Putin certainly has reasons not to invade. The sanctions imposed by the U.S. and its allies could damage Russia's economy. The majority of Russians don't want an invasion, the Levada Center, a pollster, says. A war would also likely involve large casualties on both sides — including among Ukrainian civilians, many of whom have relatives in Russia, notes Anton Troianovski, the Times's Moscow bureau chief.</p> <p>Notably, several prominent experts in Russia, including some who are close to the Kremlin, have been expressing skepticism for weeks about an invasion. Andrew Kramer, a Times correspondent who's been reporting from Ukraine since November, has noticed similar skepticism in Kyiv and among Ukrainian soldiers at the border. "You would expect more nervousness than you actually see," Andrew said, "and part of the bigger story here is that the Ukrainians have been less worried on an official level and in society than the U.S. government about the Russian buildup."</p> <p>One former Russian official told The Economist that the Kremlin believed it had more to gain from the threat of war than from war itself. That threat may already have won Putin some concessions: Ukraine's president, Volodymyr Zelensky, suggested this week that he might abandon Ukraine's effort to join NATO, which would meet one of Putin's demands. Speaking at the White House yesterday, Biden also showed a willingness to negotiate, saying the U.S. was open to new arms-control agreements with Russia.</p> <p>Other analysts believe Putin may soon launch smaller attacks against Ukraine, which would help give him influence over the country while also seeming almost like a compromise relative to the threat of a full-scale invasion. One potential smaller attack: stepped-up military assaults by Russia in the Donbas region, a disputed part of Ukraine.</p> <p>"His main goals — including less of a Western military presence in the region and a guarantee that Ukraine won't join NATO — have not changed," Anton told my colleague Claire Moses.</p> <p>2. Just timing</p>

On Friday, the Biden administration took the unusual step of telling reporters that its intelligence suggested Putin might invade as soon as Wednesday, Feb. 16 — today, that is. The announcement was part of [a broader U.S. campaign to release information about Putin's apparent intentions](#), partly to make it harder for him to justify an invasion with a false pretext.

Given that announcement, what might be the one day that Putin would least want to invade? “Everyone was talking about the 16th as invasion day,” Anton said. “So what better day than the 15th to announce you’re pulling your troops back?”

One thing to watch: Will Russia truly withdraw large numbers of troops in coming days, or did the comments by Putin and his aides over the past two days exaggerate those plans?

“I take the news that Russia announced it begins to withdraw troops from the Ukrainian border with extreme caution,” Olga Tokariuk, a Kyiv-based journalist, tweeted yesterday. “Let’s see if they actually do it.” Biden, in his remarks, said, “We have not yet verified that Russian military units are returning to their home bases.”

As Edward Wong put it, “Putin likes to cultivate an aura of unpredictability, and the physical signs of de-escalation are minor at best.”

3. An effective pushback

Edward spent last week traveling with Secretary of State Antony Blinken on a trip around the Pacific and said he was struck by how synchronized the messages from the U.S. and its allies in Asia and Europe sounded. Earlier in the Ukraine standoff, such coordination was not a given. Germany, in particular, [seemed hesitant](#) to stand up to Russia.

“There’s also a strong argument that Putin has overplayed his hand,” Edward explained. “The Biden administration and European governments have stayed in lock step on pushing back.”

The public response inside Ukraine may also have reminded Putin how costly a war would be. Many citizens seem ready to take up arms if Russia invades, and Ukrainian nationalists have been pressuring Zelensky to remain strong.

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HEADLINE	02/16 Caseloads fall below delta peak
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/16/world/covid-19-tests-cases-vaccine#us-caseloads-fall-below-the-delta-peak
GIST	<p>As the Omicron wave continues to rapidly recede in the United States and new cases plummet to their lowest levels since September, more businesses and two of the biggest music festivals have dropped mask restrictions, as have a growing number of states and cities.</p> <p>Omicron-driven cases have fallen almost as quickly as they rose this winter, with the seven-day average of U.S. cases reaching more than 140,000 on Tuesday, according to a New York Times database. Cases have now fallen below the peak of the Delta-driven wave, when they topped out at 164,418 on Sept. 1. Deaths remain high at around 2,328 per day.</p> <p>On Tuesday, Tyson Foods and Walt Disney World and Disneyland became the latest big businesses to loosen their mask requirements. They joined Walmart and others that have quickly eased restrictions as caseloads decline and states like New York and California end mask mandates.</p> <p>And, in a turning point for the struggling live-events industry, the organizers of the outdoor music festivals Coachella and Stagecoach said on Tuesday that they would not require attendees to be masked, vaccinated or tested for the coronavirus.</p>

	<p>Since the start of last week, the authorities in California, Connecticut, Illinois, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York and Oregon have announced that they were loosening indoor mask requirements. However, some cities and school districts are keeping their mandates in place.</p> <p>On Tuesday, Massachusetts public health authorities eased their mask guidelines by recommending that only vulnerable people wear face coverings inside. And Provincetown, Mass., the town that showed last summer that the Delta variant could spread among vaccinated partygoers, announced that it had zero active cases and it would not require businesses to ask patrons for proof of vaccination.</p> <p>Los Angeles County said that, as of Wednesday, masks would no longer be required outside at schools or “mega events.”</p> <p>Despite shifting mask mandates, vaccine mandates have remained largely unchanged. Experts said that with fewer people wearing masks indoors, getting more people vaccinated was even more important.</p> <p>“These protections at the societal level are really important for vulnerable people and for us all,” said Rachel Widome, a professor of epidemiology and community health at the University of Minnesota.</p> <p>Many medical experts say that mandates are effective in persuading more people to get vaccinated, which they say is essential to helping prevent the spread of the virus. Although mandates have been effective at several private companies, including Tyson Foods, they remain polarizing.</p> <p>“Mandates spur a very strong reaction,” said Neil Maniar, a professor of public health practice at Northeastern University. “You can sometimes achieve the same goal without having a mandate.”</p>
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HEADLINE	02/16 Iran official: 2015 nuclear deal ‘empty shell’
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/irans-top-security-official-says-2015-nuclear-deal-is-an-empty-shell-twitter-2022-02-16/
GIST	<p>DUBAI, Feb 16 (Reuters) - The 2015 nuclear deal between Iran and world powers has become an "empty shell", the secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council said on Twitter on Wednesday.</p> <p>"The United States and Europe failed to meet their obligations under the JCPOA. The deal has now become an empty shell for Iran in the economic sphere and the lifting of sanctions. There will be no negotiations beyond the nuclear deal with a non-compliant America and a passive Europe," Shamkhani said.</p> <p>Iran and major powers are currently in Vienna to revive the nuclear deal that former-U.S. President Donald Trump left in 2018 by imposing crippling sanctions on Iran's economy.</p> <p>Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian said on Monday during a call with EU's Borrell that "a lack of serious will on the part of the West to reach a good and credible agreement in Vienna has led to unnecessary prolongation of the talks".</p> <p>The talks, with European intermediaries shuttling between the two, have been held in Vienna since April amid growing Western fears about Tehran's accelerating nuclear advances, seen by Western powers as irreversible unless a deal is struck soon.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/16 Defiant Ukraine marks ‘Unity Day’
SOURCE	https://www.newsmax.com/world/globaltalk/defiant-kyiv-day-of-unity-russia/2022/02/15/id/1057009/
GIST	<p>Ukrainians raised national flags and played the country's anthem on Wednesday to show unity against fears of a Russian invasion that Western powers have said could be imminent.</p>

The yellow and blue banner fluttered outside schools, hospitals and many shops to mark "Unity Day," a holiday President Volodymyr Zelenskiy created this week after Russia massed troops near Ukraine's borders.

Russia has denied it will invade, but has warned it could take unspecified "military-technical" action if its security demands, including restrictions on NATO, are not met.

On Kyiv's main Khreshchatyk boulevard, where flags decorated government offices, it was business as usual for many.

"Just a normal day, but these flags are here for a purpose, to show we fear no one. They did not scare us," said Mykola, who operates a small coffee stand.

A loudspeaker at a local government office in the capital Kyiv blared patriotic songs, while television and government Youtube channels broadcast speeches and rousing reminders of Ukraine's nationhood.

In a televised address, Zelenskiy said Ukrainians were united around a common desire "to live in peace, happily, in a family, children with parents."

"No one can love our home as we can. And only we, together, can protect our home," he said.

Zelenskiy, himself an active social media user, called on Ukrainians to post pictures and videos of the Ukrainian flag and add hashtags. On Instagram, users posted under #UnityDay.

Zelenskiy has long said that, while he believes Russia is threatening to attack his country, the likelihood of an imminent invasion has been overstated by Western allies, responding to Moscow's efforts to intimidate Ukraine and sow panic.

Mykhailo Podolyak, an adviser to Zelenskiy's chief of staff, said this week the president had chosen Feb. 16 as the patriotic holiday partly ironically, in response to media reports an invasion could happen on Wednesday.

On Tuesday, the Russian defense ministry said it was returning some troops to their bases after exercises. The United States and its allies said they had not verified the move so far. U.S. President Joe Biden said more than 150,000 Russian troops were currently deployed near Ukraine.

Hours after Moscow's announcement, Ukraine said the online networks of its defense ministry and two banks were overwhelmed by a cyber attack. Although Kyiv did not name who was behind the incident, a statement suggested it was pointing the finger at Russia.

"Everyone wants to scare us and we are here to stay," said Ludmila, a pensioner, who wore a tiny Ukrainian flag in the lapel of her coat.

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HEADLINE	02/16 UK inflation rate fastest rise almost 30yrs
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/business-united-kingdom-europe-prices-inflation-8df48ead01030a995158768d54e8c9a1
GIST	<p>LONDON (AP) — Inflation in the United Kingdom has risen at the fastest rate in almost 30 years as increased costs for energy, housing and transportation squeezed household budgets.</p> <p>The consumer price index ticked up to 5.5% in the 12 months through January and was up from 5.4% the previous month, the Office for National Statistics said Wednesday. The latest figure is the highest since March 1992, when inflation reached 7.2%.</p>

By comparison, [U.S. consumer prices jumped 7.5%](#) last month — the highest rate in 40 years — while they increased to a [record 5.1% in the 19 countries that use the euro](#).

U.K. consumers are reeling from a [surge in utility bills fueled by increased demand for energy](#) worldwide as the global economy recovers from the COVID-19 pandemic. Household [natural gas prices jumped](#) 28.3% over the past year and electricity prices rose 19.2%. By comparison, U.S. gas prices increased 23.9% and electricity prices rose 10.7%.

The pain is only going to get worse for British consumers. The nation's energy regulator has announced a [54% increase in gas and electricity prices](#) that will hit 15 million households in April, the same month that income taxes are set to rise by 1.5%.

“We understand the pressures people are facing with the cost of living,” Treasury chief Rishi Sunak said in a statement. “These are global challenges, but we have listened to people's concerns and recently stepped in to provide millions of households with up to 350 pounds to help with rising energy bills.”

The Bank of England said earlier this month that it expects inflation to peak at 7.25% in April. On Feb. 3, [the bank increased its key interest rate](#) to 0.5% in an effort to curb inflation.

Capital Economics, which provides economic research to investment banks and money managers, expects the central bank to increase its key rate to 1.25% this year and 2% in 2023.

The new inflation data “will add more pressure on the Bank of England to raise interest rates rapidly,” said Paul Dales, chief U.K. economist for the firm.

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HEADLINE	02/16 Court: EU can halt Poland, Hungary funds
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/02/16/ecj-rule-of-law-poland-hungary-funds/
GIST	<p>BRUSSELS — The European Union has the right to manage and withhold certain payments from member states that violate the rule of law, the bloc's top court said Wednesday in a landmark ruling.</p> <p>The closely watched case centers on Hungary and Poland, whose governments have been accused of overseeing a gradual decline in democratic standards in recent years. Both nations have long been among major beneficiaries of E.U. payments, which continued despite concerns over efforts to undermine independent judges and the misuse of E.U. funds.</p> <p>Both countries could stand to lose billions if the E.U. decides to make use of the rules approved on Wednesday.</p> <p>The European Commission, the E.U.'s executive arm, is expected to publish detailed guidelines in the coming weeks. Affected areas could include infrastructure subsidies and farming funds, which are substantial in the cases of Hungary and Poland and have been so far managed by the countries themselves.</p> <p>The E.U.'s new instrument allows the bloc's leadership to suspend the self-management of its subsidies by countries that do not abide to the rulings of the E.U.'s top court, or by countries that tolerate the misuse of E.U. funds.</p> <p>The Wednesday ruling is also highly symbolic as a preliminary culmination of years of escalating threats between the Polish and Hungarian capitals and the European Commission in Brussels over the general direction of the diverse bloc of nations.</p> <p>Some countries, particularly in Western Europe, want to make the union more cohesive in terms of the values its members should uphold. Other countries, led by Poland and Hungary, have resisted such efforts.</p>

	<p>Poland's constitutional tribunal, which itself has been under scrutiny for being influenced by domestic political interests, said in a controversial ruling last year that Polish law can take precedence over decisions by the E.U.'s top court.</p> <p>It was unclear Wednesday whether the European Commission would propose to trigger the new mechanism. For it to take effect, at least 15 of the 27 member states — representing about 290 million people out of the E.U.'s total population of over 440 million — would need to endorse its triggering.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/15 CDC: 'excess deaths' surpass 1M
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2022/02/15/1-million-excess-deaths-in-pandemic/
GIST	<p>The United States has recorded more than 1 million "excess deaths" since the start of the pandemic, government mortality statistics show, a toll that exceeds the officially documented lethality of the coronavirus and captures the broad consequences of the health crisis that has entered its third year.</p> <p>The excess-deaths figure surpassed the milestone last week, reaching 1,023,916, according to Robert Anderson, chief of the mortality statistics branch of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Center for Health Statistics. The center updates its estimate weekly.</p> <p>Although the vast majority of the excess deaths are due to the virus, the CDC mortality records also expose swollen numbers of deaths from heart disease, hypertension, dementia and other ailments across two years of pandemic misery.</p> <p>"We've never seen anything like it," Anderson said.</p> <p>In 2019, before the pandemic, the CDC recorded 2.8 million deaths. But in 2020 and 2021, as the virus spread through the population, the country recorded roughly a half-million deaths each year in excess of the norm.</p> <p>The virus emerged in China in late 2019 and began killing people there in January 2020. It did not spread significantly in the United States until that February, and it wasn't until the final week of March 2020 that it began to send the excess-deaths metric soaring.</p> <p>The CDC's excess deaths tracker shows in detail the speed and intensity of that initial wave: Deaths soared more than 40 percent above normal in the United States in the second week of April 2020.</p> <p>The lethality in early April was concentrated in a few hot spots; for example, deaths in New York City were seven times the norm, but some regions had minimal change in mortality for many months.</p> <p>The CDC mortality branch's official count of deaths from covid-19 stood at 911,145 as of Tuesday. (The mortality researchers rely on death certificates, and that tally can be slightly lower than other CDC or academic trackers that rely on data from other sources.)</p> <p>Anderson said 91 percent of the deaths from covid-19 tracked by his unit were attributed directly to the disease. In the other 9 percent of deaths, covid-19 was listed as a contributing factor but not the primary cause.</p> <p>The CDC documented 13 other types of non-covid causes of death that were inflated during the pandemic compared with historical trends starting in 2013. For example, since the start of the pandemic, the category of ischemic heart disease has recorded an additional 30,000 deaths beyond what would be expected. Deaths from hypertensive disease were nearly 62,000 higher than expected.</p> <p>Anderson said the numbers carry a degree of ambiguity: Some heart attacks and hypertensive disease could have been associated with undiagnosed cases of coronavirus infections.</p>

The CDC's analysis estimates 208,431 excess deaths from all the non-covid causes since the start of the pandemic. At first glance, that number plus the 911,000 covid-19 deaths would suggest the excess deaths were greater than 1.1 million. But Anderson notes that many of the people who died of covid-19 were elderly, sick or very frail, and, even without a pandemic, some might not have survived across the two-year span of the pandemic. "Some of those covid deaths are not, strictly speaking, excess deaths," he said.

The million-deaths figure highlights the broad reach of the pandemic beyond the direct lethality of the virus itself.

"The bulk of the excess deaths were a direct result of covid-19 infections, but pandemics have major cascading impacts on all aspects of society," said Amesh Adalja, senior scholar at the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security.

He cited many health impacts beyond the coronavirus, including a sharp rise in drug overdoses as people with opioid use disorder struggled to get treatment or used drugs in isolation, and a drop in cancer screenings, such as mammograms and colonoscopies. The CDC previously reported that more than 93,000 people died of drug overdoses in 2020, a record number that far surpassed deaths from homicide and traffic accidents combined.

The CDC has found that 74 percent of covid-19 deaths occurred among people age 65 and older. Anderson noted that many elderly and frail people found themselves isolated because of precautions against viral spread. During the initial wave of infections, when the country largely shut down, the quality of care for the most vulnerable populations probably suffered, Anderson said. Deaths from Alzheimer's disease exceeded the expected total by 66,000 during the course of two years, he said.

"People with dementia, in isolation, they sometimes lose the will to live," Anderson said.

Some critics of shutdowns have argued they caused more harm than good. That has been a contentious issue since the first weeks of the outbreak in the United States, when infections were doubling every few days and hospitals in hot spots like New York City were in danger of being overwhelmed.

The country largely shut down for 45 days, with schools transitioning to remote learning, restaurants closing or going strictly to takeout, and airports turning desolate. Many people essentially sheltered in place. That set up a secondary health crisis, as people canceled cancer screenings, ignored warning signs of heart problems or possible strokes, and failed to receive the kind of medical care and support they needed.

Adalja said the excess deaths associated with the pandemic but not directly caused by the virus suggest that in a crisis such as this, the country should favor targeted rather than broad public health interventions.

The roller-coaster trend line of excess deaths as tracked by the CDC captures the multiple waves of infection that struck the United States since early 2020. There have been five waves total. At one point last March and April, the mortality numbers came very close to returning to normal.

The CDC records show a small, but distinct spike in deaths in late 2017 and early 2018, driven by an unusually severe flu season. But that was a tiny bump compared with what the CDC has seen since the beginnings of the coronavirus.

Anderson said the CDC had to adjust its algorithm for estimating excess deaths last fall as the pandemic continued. Although the mortality branch has given a precise number for excess deaths, the data from the past couple of months is incomplete, he said. For January, for example, the CDC estimates that only about 85 percent of the death certificates have reached the agency, he said.

Steven H. Woolf, director emeritus of the Center on Society and Health at Virginia Commonwealth University, said Tuesday that his published studies on excess deaths during the pandemic have consistently

shown that 80 to 85 percent were caused by the virus directly. The remainder can largely be attributed to disruptions caused by the pandemic, he said.

“The economic and psychological stresses of the pandemic take their toll,” Woolf said.

The pandemic exacerbated existing health disparities and led to much higher mortality among Black and Hispanic people, particularly early in the crisis, research has shown. A Washington Post analysis last year found that at the time, in the 40-to-64 age bracket, 1 in 480 Black people, 1 in 390 Hispanic people and 1 in 240 Native Americans had died during the pandemic, compared with 1 in 1,300 White people and Asian people.

The United States on the whole has an unusually high rate of chronic health conditions, such as obesity, diabetes and heart disease, and has a long-recognized “health disadvantage” compared with other wealthy nations.

That disadvantage was exacerbated by a weak and scattershot response to the pandemic, Woolf said. Other countries that reacted more quickly or took more aggressive postures to control viral spread early on were able to limit their death toll as well as long-term economic impacts, he said.

“We did not handle it well. That’s glaringly obvious,” he said. “The other countries got hit by the same virus, but no country has experienced the number of deaths we have, and even if you adjust for population, we are among the highest in the world.”

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HEADLINE	02/15 CDC lowers cruise travel warning to ‘high’
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/travel/2022/02/15/cdc-cruise-lower-warning/
GIST	<p>The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says taking a cruise now presents a lower risk than it did at the end of 2021 — at least in some cases.</p> <p>On Tuesday, the public health agency lowered its travel health notice for cruises from Level 4 to Level 3, which indicates covid-19 levels on ships are “high” rather than “very high.” The agency had been warning all travelers to avoid cruise travel regardless of vaccination status since Dec. 30, after the omicron surge sent cases on ships soaring.</p> <p>Under the new guidance, the CDC says travelers should make sure they are “up to date” with their coronavirus vaccines — which means the initial vaccination and a booster, when eligible — before taking a cruise.</p> <p>People who are not up to date with their vaccines should avoid cruise travel, the CDC says. And regardless of vaccination status, the agency says those who are at increased risk for severe illness from covid-19 should also avoid cruises.</p> <p>Ships reported 14,803 coronavirus cases between Dec. 30 and Jan. 12. Updated numbers were not available late Tuesday, but CDC spokeswoman Caitlin Shockey said in a statement that the agency made its decision to lower the travel health notice in response to decreasing cases on ships operating in the United States.</p> <p>The Cruise Lines International Association welcomed the new designation Tuesday, calling the lower level “a step in the right direction” that recognizes the industry’s health and safety protocols. Cruise companies require all crew and almost all passengers to be vaccinated, though most are not requiring boosters.</p> <p>The CDC’s change comes as some cruise operators have eased mask rules for vaccinated passengers or announced plans to drop those requirements in the near future.</p>

	<p>On its information page for cruise travel, the CDC says anyone getting on a ship should get tested as close to the departure time as possible, and check to see whether a ship has reported covid cases and if the vast majority of passengers and crew will be fully vaccinated.</p> <p>“The virus that causes COVID-19 spreads easily between people in close quarters on board ships, and the chance of getting COVID-19 on cruise ships is high, even if you are up to date with your COVID-19 vaccines,” the agency still warns.</p> <p>Last month, the CDC lifted its order that set out strict rules for cruise lines to follow; they are now recommendations. Cruise lines have until Friday to tell the agency if they plan to voluntarily follow those guidelines.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/16 Global Covid divide: open or stay closed?
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/02/16/global-covid-restrictions-divide-opening-closing/
GIST	<p>For many countries, the hope is that the worst of the pandemic is over. Britain announced last week that it was planning the last of its domestic coronavirus rules — the legal requirement to self-isolate if you test positive — by the end of the month, having already scrapped most measures for masks and vaccine passports.</p> <p>The decision by Britain followed a similar move in January from Denmark, where authorities went further and suggested they currently do not see the need to administer booster shots to children or a fourth shot to other residents. Other European countries, including Scandinavian neighbors Sweden and Norway as well as some federal states in Germany, have pulled back their own restrictions.</p> <p>In the United States, mask requirements have already come off in many states. In D.C., Mayor Muriel E. Bowser said Monday she would be dropping many of the requirements for masking and vaccines, sparking debate in a city where many take covid-19 extremely seriously.</p> <p>In many countries, the number of new daily cases remains startlingly high. Globally, the average number of cases recorded each day remains more than double what it was at any point in 2020 and 2021. But some of the areas lifting restrictions have seen cases fall sharply after the highly contagious omicron wave at the end of the year.</p> <p>That, combined with high levels of vaccination among the most vulnerable and the comparatively mild nature of the omicron variant, has led to a stark reevaluation of risks in this phase of the pandemic.</p> <p>Not all countries are on the same page. Restrictions remain a patchwork globally, as they have for most of the pandemic. Some small nations, such as the Cook Islands, are just now seeing their very first cases of coronavirus.</p> <p>“You can use measures, you can delay, and if there’s a new variant that’s potentially dangerous, you can get ready for the variant,” David Freedman, president-elect of the American Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene, told The Washington Post. “[But] you’re never going to keep it out.”</p> <p>Though other countries have moved away from the idea of “zero covid” — an attempt to eliminate transmission with travel restrictions and domestic lockdowns — the ongoing Winter Olympics in Beijing are a reminder that many countries are not ready to loosen restrictions yet.</p> <p>What’s happening in Hong Kong, meanwhile, may be evidence of what happens when zero covid breaks down. Recently experts have warned that an omicron wave hitting the city could overwhelm it, predicting new daily cases could reach nearly 30,000 by the end of March — far above previous outbreaks in the financial hub, which had avoided the number of cases seen in other megacities.</p>

Chief Executive Carrie Lam said this weekend it was “not an option to surrender to the virus,” with Hong Kong authorities moving toward the sort of strict lockdowns and restrictions seen in mainland Chinese cities. But recent protests against Lam, who is seen as loyal to Beijing despite Hong Kong’s history as a democracy, means it would have a far harder time.

“Even just implementing such a measure would be virtually impossible due to a lack of manpower, and would risk inflaming tensions between the police and residents less than three years after protests pitted them against each other,” Bloomberg News’s Kari Soo Lindberg, Danny Lee and Shirley Zhao [reported this week](#).

As [The Post’s Shibani Mahtani and Theodora Yu reported last week](#), this breakdown in trust could be one reason that omicron has surged — vaccination rates have been unusually low in Hong Kong, with elderly residents in particular [less likely to take the shots](#).

Some global health experts warn that the dichotomy of covid-19 experiences across the world means there is little agreement on how to handle it. World Health Organization Director General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said Monday that some countries had grown complacent, even when new cases continue to spread globally.

“In some countries, high vaccine coverage, combined with the lower severity of omicron, is driving a false narrative that the pandemic is over,” Tedros [said at a covid-19 Global Action Meeting](#) convened by the United States. “At the same time, low vaccine coverage and low testing rates in other countries are creating the ideal conditions for new variants to emerge.”

By the WHO’s estimation, roughly 116 countries are likely to miss a target of vaccinating roughly 70 percent of the population by the middle of the year — leaving open the possibility that much of the world will still see the virus circulating and potentially mutating.

And even in countries that are highly vaccinated, the ill effects of the pandemic are still evident. On Monday, the [Canadian government invoked the Emergencies Act](#), a never-before-used law that would grant federal authorities more powers to respond to self-styled “Freedom Convoy” blockades and demonstrations against vaccination mandates and other coronavirus restrictions.

The importance of trust in governments during the pandemic was made clear in a recent article [published in the Lancet](#). As Danish researcher and government adviser Michael Bang Petersen recently put it in an [op-ed for the New York Times](#), as the reality of the pandemic evolves, governments will have to carefully manage political divides about when to open up and when to put in place restrictions.

“Should new variants turn the presumed end (at least for Denmark) into a brief pause,” Bang Peterson wrote, such divides will make the “next round with the virus even more difficult.”

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HEADLINE	02/15 More disabled students shipped out state?
SOURCE	https://crosscut.com/news/2022/02/washington-shipping-more-disabled-students-out-state
GIST	<p>Meseret Haile had run out of choices. Her 12-year-old son, Leoul, who’s autistic and nonverbal, was stuck in Seattle Children’s Hospital for nearly eight months. After several violent episodes at home, he couldn’t safely return to his school, and no other facilities would take him.</p> <p>Except for one — halfway across the country, in Wichita, Kansas. It was called Heartspring, a residential facility and school for kids with developmental disabilities. The Bellevue School District, where Haile’s son previously attended, would pay roughly \$300,000 a year to send him there.</p> <p>So Haile agreed.</p>

“It was a very tough decision for me,” says Haile, a 40-year-old King County Metro driver. “But I had no choice. Nobody could find anything in Washington state.”

For families in Washington, it’s an increasingly common problem. During the 2020-21 school year, school districts in Washington sent 80 students to out-of-state facilities, according to public records from the state Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. That’s nearly four times as many Washington kids sent out of state as during the 2016-17 school year, data show, although the state agency says part of the increase reflected in the data may be a result of better tracking in recent years.

School districts send students to out-of-state facilities if they do not have the resources to provide services for children with complex needs, typically resulting from disabilities or childhood trauma. But doing so can be costly. In total, those 80 students sent out of state last year cost school districts nearly \$13 million, according to state data. And the actual amount of spending may be even higher, since the data from the state show only costs that districts asked to be reimbursed for.

A spreadsheet of these placements, obtained by InvestigateWest, shows which districts most frequently ship students out of the state, and where those placements are. Almost exclusively, it was schools west of the Cascades paying to send students to facilities as far away as Utah, Kansas or Massachusetts.

Advocates for kids with disabilities say they’re alarmed at how many students are being sent away from Washington. They argue it highlights a growing crisis, underscoring the lack of options for people with disabilities and the need for Washington lawmakers to invest more into special education so students can stay in school at home.

“This signals loud and clear that we need to spend more time thinking about solutions that are here, so that families aren’t in crisis, kids aren’t in crisis, and we’re not separating them during this time,” says Stacy Dym, executive director of the Arc of Washington, a nonprofit organization advocating for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Next: WA officials want to end fees charged to parents for kids' jail time

Families, meanwhile, are left to comfort children they may not see for months at a time. Haile tries to visit and Zoom with Leoul as much as she can, but it’s hard to tell how well he’s doing over a screen, she says.

“We miss him so much every day,” Haile says. “You don’t know what’s going on with him at all. ... You can imagine, that’s very stressful.”

Questions raised

Susan Kas, a staff attorney with nonprofit advocacy group Disability Rights Washington, only recently learned about school districts sending students out of the state. For her, it felt like “deja vu,” she says. And not in a good way.

Just a few years ago, she discovered that the state Department of Children, Youth and Families was doing the same thing — shipping 80 foster kids to residential facilities out of the state.

“I have all the same questions that I had back in 2018 with the foster care system,” Kas says. “I don’t know if the answers are going to be similar in this situation, but I certainly have the same questions about what is the root cause and what’s underneath this.”

With foster care, what Kas and Disability Rights Washington found was disturbing. They discovered “dismal” conditions at one Iowa facility where foster children were sent. Many of the residential treatment centers were owned by a for-profit company named Sequel, and reports across the country detailed allegations of child abuse at Sequel-owned facilities. The state of Washington was sued by foster children and Disability Rights Washington in 2020 for placing foster children in hotels, offices and out-of-state facilities. Washington — along with other states — decided in December 2020 to stop placing foster children at Sequel facilities, with the goal to eventually stop sending kids out of state entirely.

The facilities that school districts paid to send students to in 2020-21, however, aren't owned by Sequel. The state superintendent has a list of approved "nonpublic agencies" that districts can choose from. Some are residential treatment facilities for kids with behavior problems. Others are specialized schools for kids with severe autism.

Andrea Kadlec, also a staff attorney with Disability Rights Washington, says she was "alarmed" to learn of this growing trend and plans to examine it further. In particular, she's interested in the demographics. Students who are restrained or put into isolation in public schools are disproportionately students of color, in foster care or homeless, she says.

"Are those also the kids that are the most segregated?" Kadlec says. Both attorneys are worried about the sheer number of out-of-state placements and the rapid trend upward.

"Our concern is that the number will continue to grow. And if it gets much bigger than that number, then it will be a problem that will be much more difficult to solve," Kas says.

There are also questions about oversight. Glenna Gallo, the state's assistant superintendent of special education services, says that when a school district places a student out of state, oversight still falls to that school district. District officials typically visit these facilities to ensure they're following Washington state requirements, and the out-of-state schools are supposed to report disciplinary data.

"The districts have to remain involved," Gallo says. "These students are their responsibility."

But the Arc of Washington's Dym says the reality may not be so simple. Districts may find it difficult to get data on disciplinary actions that the treatment centers are taking against students, and those numbers aren't always available to the public, as they are for public schools.

"That is problematic, because it can very much be out of sight, out of mind," Dym says.

Gallo, who is awaiting a U.S. Senate confirmation hearing to join President Biden's administration as assistant secretary for special education and rehabilitative services at the U.S. Department of Education, says districts shouldn't be faulted for spending money on placing students in a setting that meets their needs. For some students with sensory challenges, there may be only a few places in the country that provide what they need. But there are other reasons to look critically at schools shipping students out of state, Gallo says.

"What could be a concern is why are those decisions being made? Are they being made based on the student's needs? ... Or are they being made in part due to staffing or capacity challenges of the district?" Gallo says.

Toby, a parent in the Northshore School District who asked to withhold his last name to protect his daughter's privacy, says sending his daughter away "saved her life." She experienced significant trauma as a child, Toby says, and in her teenage years displayed severely disruptive behavior both at school and home.

Toby feared she was at risk of harming herself and others. She went to Ryther, a treatment center in Seattle, but was still struggling afterward. Finally, the school district, under the advice of an independent psychiatrist, recommended that she be sent to a therapeutic school in southern Utah. And there, Toby says, his daughter is thriving. She's on track to graduate, and more important, her mental health has improved.

"She finally, finally is someone who believes and sees that she has self-worth," Toby says, "and that the things that have happened to her, the trauma that she has experienced, is not a reflection of her."

For Toby, it's evidence that the right kind of professional support can make a huge difference. He only wishes it was available at home.

The Northshore School District, serving parts of King and Snohomish counties, used to have a unique needs program developed to keep all students in its school district, says Julie Trembath Neuberger, director of secondary special education.

“Because we firmly believe that the least restrictive environment matters. We want the students to be a part of the district,” she says.

But there were still issues with a lack of resources and staff members getting injured by students. Three years ago, Northshore shuttered the program. Those students, she says, needed therapeutic support 24 hours a day, something that the school district could not provide on its own and that is hard to find in the state as a whole.

Last school year, Northshore sent six students out of state, at an average cost of \$238,473 per student. For comparison, just four years earlier, Northshore placed only one student out of the state, state data shows, and it cost less than \$75,000.

The underlying problems causing schools to send students away are ones that have plagued the state for years, advocates and education officials say: a lack of investment in special education, and a lack of community placements for those with disabilities or behavioral health issues.

The state Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction has been concerned, too, Gallo says, and the state agency expressed those concerns about the use of nonpublic agencies to the state Legislature in 2018.

“Our concern that we expressed at the time, and that we continue to have, is that there are not sources of funding that help districts develop internal capacity of staff around how to provide these specialized services,” Gallo says.

When asked by InvestigateWest why it was mostly Western Washington districts shipping kids out of state, Gallo says she was “not aware” of that pattern but will investigate it further. She says OSPI wants districts to be able to have trained staff “so that students don’t escalate to the point where they need intensive services outside of the district.” That would require more funding for special education.

So far, she says, she hasn’t seen the Legislature address the issue directly. But there are bills to increase school personnel, psychologists, counselors, nurses and training for educators. Those could contribute to reducing the need for nonpublic agencies, Gallo says.

Arzu Forough, president and CEO of the Washington Autism Alliance, agrees that more support for public schools would help as a first step to reducing out-of-state placements. Often, she says, the dire situation kids are in before being sent out of the state can have lasting effects.

“It’s the years of trauma these students face before they’re placed in an appropriate placement that stays with them and scars them for many, many years,” Forough says. “The focus should be on timely access to effective education programs and effective therapeutic programs.”

Forough says she’s aware of many other parents like Toby and like Haile with children who are either stuck in a hospital, unable to find a safe placement, or who have been sent out of the state. She adds that Washington doesn’t have any therapeutic boarding schools, which focus more on education than residential treatment centers.

“And so we have this mishmash of different systems that don’t work well together,” Forough says. “It doesn’t surprise me that families have to make this really difficult decision to place students out of state.”

Neuberger of the Northshore School District speculates that Washington lacks residential behavioral treatment options overall in part because children in the state can refuse residential treatment once they turn 13, making it less likely for such a facility to be built in Washington. The law is intended to allow kids more freedom in their care. State lawmakers tweaked it in 2019 to give parents more power in getting

	<p>outpatient treatment for kids. In states with more residential behavioral health facilities, however, like Utah, the age of consent is 18.</p> <p>In his proposed budget this legislative session, Gov. Jay Inslee calls for funding that would add to the state's behavioral health treatment capacity. One proposal would add bed space for therapeutic and out-of-home services for youth with significant behavioral issues. Another proposal would add a short-term Residential Crisis Stabilization Program for youth with severe behavioral health problems.</p> <p>Dym, formerly Inslee's education ombudsperson, supports added investment in behavioral health options. She doesn't think any laws need to be changed in order to better serve students in Washington. If it costs \$300,000 to move a student to Kansas, she asks, what could that money be used for here?</p> <p>"We have the ability and capacity in our state to take care of our own kids," Dym says. "And we really have made a solid commitment not to. Because it's not like the Legislature and the agencies are not aware of the situation."</p>
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HEADLINE	02/15 Study: omicron wave brutal on kids
SOURCE	https://arstechnica.com/science/2022/02/omicron-wave-was-brutal-on-kids-hospitalization-rates-4x-higher-than-deltas/
GIST	<p>Despite being widely seen as mild, the omicron coronavirus variant has been brutal on children and adolescents—particularly babies and toddlers, who are still ineligible for vaccination.</p> <p>According to a study published Tuesday by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the peak rate of pediatric hospitalizations during the recent omicron surge was four times higher than the peak seen during delta's wave last fall. And the largest increase was seen in children ages 0 to 4, who had a peak hospitalization rate five times higher than that seen amid delta's wave.</p> <p>The study authors, led by CDC emergency response team researcher Kristin Marks, were careful to note that incidental cases of COVID-19 in hospitalized children do not account for the jump in rates amid omicron. Marks and colleagues looked carefully at medical charts from hospitalized children during both the delta and omicron waves. They compared the proportions of children coming into hospitals who had COVID-19-related symptoms at admission and were marked as being admitted specifically for COVID-19. Between the two waves, they found no significant differences in those proportions.</p> <p>Specifically, during the delta wave, about 88 percent of children entering the hospital had COVID-19-related symptoms, compared with 87 percent during the omicron wave. And about 81 percent of hospitalized children were admitted primarily for COVID-19, compared with about 82 percent during the omicron wave.</p> <p>"Consistent with national hospital surveillance data, the findings in this report indicate that the omicron-predominant period had higher rates of pediatric COVID-19 hospitalizations than the Delta-predominant period," Marks and her colleagues concluded.</p> <p>Not so mild</p> <p>Marks et al. also noted that omicron produced severe disease in some children and has the potential to cause long-term symptoms. "Observed indicators of severe COVID-19 among children and adolescents, in addition to the potential for longer-term sequelae, highlight the importance of multicomponent strategies to reduce the incidence of COVID-19, including vaccination of eligible persons and other prevention measures," such as masking, they wrote.</p> <p>The study drew data from a hospital surveillance network that spans 99 counties across 14 states. The authors included medical records of children who tested positive for COVID-19 and were admitted to a network hospital between July 3, 2021, and January 22, 2022. The omicron wave was considered to span</p>

	<p>December 19 onward. The authors determined rates of cases based on pre-existing population data on the areas surrounding the hospitals.</p> <p>During the two waves, pediatric weekly hospitalization rates peaked during the weeks ending on September 11, 2021 (amid delta) and on January 8, 2022 (amid omicron). During the omicron wave, weekly pediatric hospitalizations peaked at 7.1 per 100,000 children, which is about four times higher than delta's peak rate of 1.8 per 100,000.</p> <p>Peak hospitalization rates of children ages 0 to 4 years during the omicron wave were more than five times higher, with about 15.6 hospitalizations per 100,000 children, compared with delta's peak in that age group of 2.9 per 100,000. Additionally, omicron hospitalization rates among children ages 5 to 11 and adolescents 12 to 17 were both around double their peaks during delta.</p> <p>When the researchers looked at admission rates to intensive care units, they also found an increase during the omicron wave. Peak ICU admissions amid omicron were 1.4 times higher than during delta.</p> <p>Vaccination appeared to strongly protect against pediatric hospitalizations, but vaccine availability was limited across the study. The only age group that was eligible for vaccination throughout the whole study was the 12- to 17-year-olds. Based on December data, hospitalization rates among unvaccinated adolescents were six times higher than among fully vaccinated adolescents in that same age group.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/15 Homeless addicts take over Seattle park
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3350749/rantz-homeless-addicts-terrorize-seattle-neighborhood/
GIST	<p>Homeless people living in a dangerous and inhumane Seattle encampment are terrorizing nearby homeowners. Despite months of complaints and violence — including a stabbing — the city is only now prioritizing the encampment. But a sweep is not imminent.</p> <p>Anywhere from 10-30 tents occupy Seven Hills Park in Seattle's Capitol Hill neighborhood at any given time. The homeless people living there come and go. It is in the middle of a residential area, sharing a wall that separates the park from expensive townhomes.</p> <p>Since at least July 2021, the encampment has been a dangerous nuisance. There's been a stabbing, assaults, threats, open-air drug use, and public defecation and urination. This past Sunday, there was a near-fatal overdose.</p> <p>Residents say the city has ignored their pleas entirely. But now that the park is earning media coverage, the city says it will act. But they're not moving with urgency, and it's coming with activists stalking homeowners.</p> <p>Using homeowner's property as a toilet and drug den</p> <p>The homeless people living in the camp can be aggressive — when they're not using nearby private property as a toilet or shooting up.</p> <p>The park shares a border wall with pricey townhomes. A walkway on the townhome-side of the wall offers privacy that the encampment cannot provide. While homeowners can use this location as a door to access their homes, it's no longer safe. The homeless have taken over.</p> <p>Homeless people in the park shoot up, smoke meth, or relieve themselves, though sometimes they don't need privacy to do that. Some homeless will urinate on the townhomes in full view of the public.</p> <p>One homeowner shared several graphic and disturbing pictures and surveillance videos with the Jason Rantz Show on KTTH.</p>

“Seven Hills doesn’t have any bathroom facilities,” Mariana, who lives in a property across the street from the park, tells the Jason Rantz Show on KTTH. “So the people who have been camping there, you know, ... it’s just a giant biohazard at this point.”

Mariana says nearby residents have complained to the city for months, but they never see anything done.

“It started with just a few tents, and then it doubled in size, ... tripled in size. I think we were all trying to get the city’s attention. And yeah, just never got a response. It’s fluctuated between 10 to 20 tents over the past six months,” she said.

Other homeowners say they’ve seen the encampment reach 30 tents.

A stabbing and assault

Some of the homeless people living at Seven Hills Park are dangerous. There have been reports of assault and threats.

“I also have heard from neighbors when they’ve tried to engage saying, ‘hey, can you please stop defecating on my doorstep,’ that they’ve gotten hostile. One of my neighbors was assaulted and did take it to the police,” Mariana said.

In one video captured on a homeowner’s Ring security system, a homeless man demands to the homeowner, “Let me in!” He appears either drunk or high, mistaking the place for his own.

In November 2021, there was a stabbing at the encampment.

According to police, the victim was a homeless woman living in a tent. After an argument, the suspect stabbed the victim, who survived. Police arrested the suspect and recovered a knife.

Super Bowl night saw an overdose

Many of the people living in the park are drug addicts.

On the evening of the Super Bowl, a neighbor says a man was overdosing. But no one in the encampment would help.

“I had to call 911 for an overdose last night because no one in the park would, and one of them did have a phone,” a neighbor told me Monday.

The homeowner says the homeless “sit on the [park] bench and openly shoot up.” They also do it in front of her back entryway.

She says the park has gotten progressively worse, and she and her neighbors deal with constant break-in attempts from homeless people who are high or drunk or are simply trying to burglarize the property.

City of Seattle did little to address the camp

The City of Seattle did not consider this encampment a priority for a sweep, even after the November stabbing. The encampment enjoys sporadic clean-ups courtesy of the city, but it has not been enough to satisfy residents concerned with the smell and unsanitary conditions. There are dozens of rat sightings a night.

Despite frequent calls, multiple residents tell me they’ve never received any meaningful response from the city. They only get talking points.

“The only response we can get from the city is, ‘well, outreach is prioritized based on highest public safety risk.’ But that begs the question, what’s the definition of a public safety risk?” Mariana asks.

Apparently, a safety risk involves media attention.

Now there's movement — sort of

Seattle Parks and Recreation confirmed via a spokesperson that “intensified outreach” only started last week — after media outlets began to cover the encampment. But they say no sweep is imminent.

“Intensified outreach began last week following the City identifying the encampment as a high priority,” a Seattle Parks spokesperson emailed the Jason Rantz Show on KTTH. “Once a site is deemed a priority encampment site by an interdepartmental team at the City, HSD’s [Human Services Department’s] HOPE Team [Homelessness Outreach and Provider Ecosystem] ensures that offers of shelter are made to individuals residing at these priority encampments prior to a removal. Depending on the size of an encampment and availability of shelter resources, this outreach coordination process may take weeks.”

But why wouldn’t the city clear up the encampment sooner? Wouldn’t a stabbing lead to a high priority designation? A Seattle Parks spokesperson wouldn’t answer.

But a member of the administration did meet with residents at a recent community meeting by the encampment. It was an attempt to address community concerns — finally. Activists from outside the community also showed up. According to two neighbors at the meeting, the activists harassed homeowners, even following some of them as they walked home.

New mayor made big promises

Newly elected Mayor Bruce Harrell campaigned on a promise to clean up city streets.

Harrell is under increased pressure to deliver, even though he’s only been in office a few weeks. The media coverage may be intensifying that pressure. Voters indicated they were unhappy with the direction of the city under then-Mayor Jenny Durkan, who was hindered by a recalcitrant council.

While Harrell says he hopes to clean up the city, that city council has almost the same makeup as the previous years. Councilmembers are almost unanimously opposed to all sweeps. They helped create the homelessness crisis and say they will only allow sweeps if free housing is offered to the homeless.

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HEADLINE	02/15 Wholesale prices soared again in Jan.
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/feb/15/wholesale-prices-soared-again-january-inflation-re/
GIST	<p>Wholesale prices jumped last month at a rate 9.7% higher than a year ago, the Labor Department said Tuesday in another sign that inflation remains high.</p> <p>The producer price index, a measure of inflation before goods reach consumers, rose 1% from December. Excluding food and energy prices, wholesale inflation rose 0.8% from the previous month and climbed 8.3% from January 2021.</p> <p>The department said a 1.6% increase in outpatient health care costs was a “major factor” in the jump.</p> <p>The rate was twice as high as expected by many economists, and was near a record in data going back to 2010.</p> <p>Consumer prices soared 7.5% in January, the government reported last week, reaching a 40-year high that has wiped out wage gains for many workers.</p> <p>Inflation is looming as a major campaign issue in the midterm elections.</p> <p>“President Biden continues to be Jimmy Carter 2.0,” tweeted Sen. Ted Cruz, Texas Republican, in response to the new report.</p>

The Federal Reserve is expected to raise a key interest rate next month in an effort to slow inflation. The move will also mean higher borrowing costs on credit cards, auto loans and home mortgages.

A 27% year-over-year spike in energy prices, including a 9.5% monthly jump in fuel oil prices and a 4.2% jump in electricity prices, drove the surge in consumer prices.

That means U.S. prices are reaching new highs for producers and consumers amid global shortages and supply disruptions, but the producers have felt the greatest increases so far.

Hans Dau, CEO of the Mitchell Madison Group consulting firm, said the “perfect storm” of pent-up demand meeting limited supply means consumer prices will likely rise further to meet the higher level of producer prices.

“Producer price inflation is likely to work itself into consumer inflation through the supply chain, indicating continuing high inflation for much of 2022,” Mr. Dau said. “With omicron waning, this trend will accelerate in the short-term, unless the Fed hits the brakes hard and triggers a recession.”

Mr. Dau added that “historically high fiscal spending and accommodative central bank policies globally” have contributed to the supply chain crisis.

“Unfortunately, it is not a transitory phenomenon and not predominantly a supply chain issue, but rather due to unparalleled fiscal and monetary expansion,” he said.

John D. Rosen, a consumer marketing expert who teaches business at the University of New Haven, agreed that the report means consumer price increases will accelerate more quickly until the Federal Reserve implements planned interest-rate hikes.

“We can expect this to flow through the economy to noticeably affect consumer prices in the near future and prompt the Fed to increase interest rates more rapidly in an attempt to tame inflation,” Mr. Rosen said.

Ryan Young, a senior fellow at the libertarian Competitive Enterprise Institute, said the Fed should consider acting even sooner than March.

“The Fed is waiting too long to act,” Mr. Young said. “It has said it will wind down its bond-buying program and raise the federal funds rate starting in March. These are the right things to do, but they should have started months ago.”

With the producer price index rising at an annualized 9.7%, well above inflation’s annualized 7.5% pace, he added that “things are likely to get worse before they get better.”

“The Producer Price Index is a leading indicator, which means it is a sign of things to come,” Mr. Young said. “While we are unlikely to reach Carter-era stagflation territory, we are getting uncomfortably close.”

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HEADLINE	02/15 Calif. county recruits unvaccinated deputies
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/feb/15/los-angeles-unvaccinated-officers-fired-kern-county-job-california
GIST	<p>A sheriff’s department in southern California is encouraging law enforcement officers who oppose vaccine mandates to “take back [their] freedom” and apply for jobs with the department.</p> <p>The Kern county sheriff’s office released a video last week inviting applications from deputies within Los Angeles county, where officials passed an order that could lead to the termination of thousands of county workers who haven’t received the Covid-19 vaccine or provided a religious or medical exemption.</p>

“Drive north, we have a place for you ... Kern county is a community that backs the blue,” the minute-long ad says as country singer George Strait sings The Weight of the Badge, a song paying tribute to police.

Covid-19 vaccination rates inside the LA sheriff’s department have lagged far below that of the public with just [54% of workers fully vaccinated](#), despite a vaccination mandate for county employees. Last week the county [board of supervisors](#) moved to shift vaccine mandate enforcement power away from LA county Sheriff Alex Villanueva. Villanueva, who has criticized mask orders and said he will not fire workers who refuse the vaccine, said such an act could lead to more than 4,000 unvaccinated deputies losing their jobs.

The sheriff’s office in Kern county, a deeply conservative expanse located immediately to the north of Los Angeles, responded with its video the next day. “So take back your freedom, and APPLY today to work at the Kern county sheriff’s office. You deserve a job that welcomes you and your values, with open arms.”

The battle over vaccine mandates for law enforcement in southern California highlights the divide over Covid health rules across the state. Vaccination rates continue to lag in more rural and conservative regions of California, where 70% of all residents are vaccinated. Outrage over Covid-19 restrictions led to the ouster of a Republican county supervisor in [Shasta county](#), handing control of the board of supervisors to a militia-supported group.

Kern county doesn’t require vaccinations for its workers. Its sheriff, Donny Youngblood, said in a [press conference](#) on Friday that he doesn’t know how many of his department’s deputies are vaccinated. Just 52% of Kern county residents are vaccinated, compared to 70% of LA county residents, according to the [New York Times](#).

“There’s a substantial number of deputies that already work here that aren’t vaccinated,” he said. “I have no idea [how many] and don’t care,” Youngblood said at the press conference.

Though vaccination rates among law enforcement across the state have trailed behind the statewide rate, Youngblood said Kern county specifically wanted to target LA deputies. “The reason we reached out specifically to LA is there will be 4,000 deputy sheriffs if this were to happen that have real families have real children have real bills that could be unemployed because they refuse to take the vaccination.”

Youngblood, who falsely claimed the vaccine doesn’t help or stop the spread of Covid, added that his department has 125 deputy positions it is struggling to fill. “Our substations are about half-staffed. And it really boils down to this: when you call 911 and it’s an emergency and you really want a deputy there, are you gonna ask him if he’s vaccinated or not?”

Kern county law enforcement has received scrutiny in the past. In 2015, the Guardian found that law enforcement in Kern county [killed more people](#) relative to its population than in any other county in the US.

Covid-19 was the leading cause of death for law enforcement killed in the line of duty in 2021 across the US, which saw the highest number of line-of-duty officer deaths since 1930. According to a [report](#) from the National Law Enforcement Memorial and Museum, preliminary data shows Covid killed 301 of 458 active federal, state, tribal and local law enforcement officers who died last year.

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HEADLINE	02/15 Vaccination reduces risk getting long Covid
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/15/vaccination-reduces-chance-of-getting-long-covid-studies-find
GIST	Covid vaccination reduces the risk of developing long Covid, while current sufferers may experience an improvement in symptoms after getting jabbed, a comprehensive review by the UK Health Security Agency suggests.

	<p>The “rapid evidence briefing” drew together data from 15 UK and international studies, about half of which examined whether Covid vaccination protected against developing long Covid if someone had never been infected, while the rest looked at the impact of vaccination among people who already had long Covid.</p> <p>It found that, as well as any benefit obtained by not catching the virus in the first place, those who do catch it are less likely to develop long Covid if they have received one or two doses of vaccine compared with unvaccinated individuals.</p> <p>According to the two studies that measured individual long Covid symptoms, the fully vaccinated were less likely than unvaccinated people to develop medium- or long-term symptoms such as fatigue, headache, weakness in the arms and legs, persistent muscle pain, hair loss, dizziness, shortness of breath, loss of smell or scarring of the lungs.</p> <p>“There is also evidence that unvaccinated people with long Covid who were subsequently vaccinated had, on average, reduced long Covid symptoms, or fewer long Covid symptoms than those who remained unvaccinated,” the review said.</p> <p>There were, however, some people who reported worsened symptoms after vaccination, it added.</p> <p>Deborah Dunn-Walters, chair of the British Society for Immunology Covid-19 taskforce and a professor of immunology at the University of Surrey, said there was not yet enough information to explain why vaccination should lead to an improvement in people’s symptoms. “The term ‘long Covid’ covers a wide range of post-Covid conditions and so we don’t yet fully understand all the processes involved,” she said.</p> <p>One theory is that it may help clear up remaining reservoirs of virus in the body, or fragments of virus that are triggering ongoing inflammation. Another possibility is that vaccination rebalances the immune response in individuals whose symptoms are being driven by autoimmune-like processes – this may also explain why a few people report worse symptoms after vaccination, Dunn-Walters added.</p> <p>She said: “This review re-emphasises the importance of everyone, no matter their age, getting vaccinated against Covid-19. Although there has been a high uptake of the vaccines in the UK so far, a significant number of people still need to come forward for a first or second dose. We must continue to make every effort to reach these people and encourage them to come forward for Covid-19 vaccination.”</p> <p>Prof Stephen Powis, the national medical director of NHS England, said: “With more than 10,000 people in hospital with Covid [in the UK], this study is a timely and important reminder that vaccines remain our best protection against the virus, reducing the chances of becoming seriously unwell as well as the effects of long Covid.”</p>
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HEADLINE	02/15 Kremlin impatience in Ukraine standoff?
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/15/duma-manoeuvre-points-to-kremlin-impatience-in-ukraine-standoff
GIST	<p>Russian lawmakers have passed a direct appeal to Vladimir Putin to recognise the Russian-controlled separatist states of Donetsk and Luhansk, providing a way to up the ante in the regional crisis without launching an attack on Ukraine.</p> <p>Putin has said he will not immediately recognise the so-called republics but he is likely to wield that option as a bargaining chip as he continues to demand security guarantees from the west.</p> <p>The stage-managed manoeuvre unfolded on Tuesday as Putin also confirmed a “partial” withdrawal of Russian forces from the Ukrainian border, a decision that would reduce the potential for a war if it involves a large number of troops. It is not yet clear that it will.</p>

Since 2014, Russia has used the deadly Donbas conflict to divert attention from its annexation of Crimea and as part of its strategy to maintain control over Ukraine's geopolitical future.

The Minsk ceasefire deal signed in 2015 formalised a plan to reinsert the Donbas territories into Ukraine but give them a veto over Kyiv's foreign policy choices, including potential accession to Nato.

But the deal has stalled over ceasefire violations, disagreements about what steps to take first, and a growing belief in Ukraine that the deal was signed at gunpoint and is no longer politically viable.

Hawkish officials and prominent figures in Russia such as the head of RT, Margarita Simonyan, have called for recognition of the regions' independence. But that is far from a popular sentiment and would remove a key element of the Kremlin's leverage over Ukraine by killing the Minsk deal.

"The recognition of the LPR and DPR [Luhansk and Donetsk people's republics] by Russia would signify its intentional withdrawal from the Minsk agreements," a Ukrainian foreign ministry spokesperson said on Tuesday.

Moscow has already made it difficult to reintegrate the territories by issuing hundreds of thousands of Russian passports there and arming and backing their governments since 2014.

Still, a formal recognition of independence would be seen as a considerable escalation. The Nato secretary general, Jens Stoltenberg, said recognition would be a "blatant violation of Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty". And some European officials have said it would trigger sanctions packages put together to deter a Russian invasion.

"The call of Russia's State Duma to recognise the occupied territories of Ukraine is an open escalation," said Gabrielius Landsbergis, Lithuania's foreign minister. "Approval by Kremlin should be met with swift and decisive sanctions."

The decision may give Putin a way to save face from the crisis, after trying and so far failing to achieve guarantees that Nato will not admit Ukraine and will remove its infrastructure from countries that joined after 1997.

Rather than starting a war, he could kick out the legs from under the ceasefire settlement and move troops into Donbas or even provoke a Ukrainian attack, giving Russia a casus belli.

While Putin argued in his remarks that his deputies were "following public opinion", it is clear that the Duma vote on Tuesday was largely managed by the Kremlin. As Putin noted, the decision for a partial withdrawal from the borders was directly tied to the vote on recognising the republics. One form of pressure on Ukraine was being swapped for another.

At an impasse in negotiations with the west, Putin is threatening to demolish the status quo. It may mean Russia is considering other options besides war to achieve its goals, but it also signals the Kremlin is growing impatient.

"Russia hears that Ukraine is not prepared to join Nato today, and we know this premise," Putin said after talks with the German chancellor, Olaf Scholz. "And they say right away that it won't be admitted tomorrow, but will be admitted when they prepare it for this. But this might be too late for us. Therefore, we want this issue to be settled now, right now, in the near future, through a negotiating process, by peaceful means."

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HEADLINE	02/15 Cuba protesters sentenced up to 20yrs
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/15/cuba-protesters-sentenced-20-years-anti-government-july

GIST	<p>Cuban courts have handed out sentences of up to 20 years in prison to a group of people accused of taking part in protests that swept across the island in July.</p> <p>The 20 defendants sentenced in the eastern province of Holguín were convicted after trials last month on charges of sedition. Hundreds of other people await verdicts following trials elsewhere.</p> <p>Thousands of people took to the streets in cities across Cuba on 11 and 12 July — the largest such protests in decades on the island – many frustrated with shortages, low salaries and power outages, as well as with the socialist government.</p> <p>“This was terrible ... People have been crying, inconsolable there,” said Mailyn Rodríguez, who said by telephone that her husband Yosvany Rosell García had been sentenced to 20 years after prosecutors had sought a 30-year sentence.</p> <p>“The prosecution requests were too high and the sentences horrific,” she said from Holguín, some 800km (480 miles) east of Havana.</p> <p>She said relatives of the 20 were summoned to the court on Monday to hear the verdict, which followed a trial in early January.</p> <p>García, a 33-year-old welder, had denied accusations he threw stones during the protests, his wife said. She said he would appeal.</p> <p>Similar trials also took place last month in the provinces of Santa Clara and Mayabeque and in Havana, though no verdicts have yet been announced there.</p> <p>While most of the protesters were peaceful, some vandalized or looted vehicles and shops and some threw stones at police. One person died in Havana.</p> <p>An activist group that follows the cases, Justice 11J, distributed copies of the sentences. It said the shortest penalties handed out involved five years of limited liberty, but not jail, for five youths aged 16 to 17.</p> <p>Cuban authorities have never reported the total number of arrests during the protests, though Justice 11J and other groups have reported about 1,300 arrests.</p> <p>In August, officials reported 23 trials of 67 defendants on relatively minor charges.</p> <p>In January, they announced the trials of 790 people on more serious charges such as sedition, violent attacks, theft and vandalism.</p> <p>The attorney general’s office said last month that the sedition charges related “to the level of violence demonstrated”.</p> <p>Human rights groups say the crackdown shows how Cuba’s judicial system is routinely used to snuff out dissent. Cuba, in turn, alleges US-based opposition groups are trying to instigate unrest through social media campaigns.</p> <p>After the protests, Cuban leaders acknowledged some complaints were justified and said they would seek to alleviate distress through social and economic programs. The government blames a US economic embargo, rather than its state-centered policies, for its problems.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/15 ‘Freedom convoy’ protesters in Ottawa
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/freedom-convoy-protesters-in-canadas-capital-city-dig-in-after-tougher-measures-11644947631?mod=hp_lead_pos12

OTTAWA—The Canadian government on Tuesday defended its decision to invoke unusual [emergency powers](#) to quell protests that have paralyzed the capital for 19 days, with the country's top security official calling a small group behind the current demonstrations a serious threat.

"There have been those who have tried to characterize these illegal blockades [as being] about vaccines and mandates and fatigue with the pandemic. That is not what is driving this movement right now," Marco Mendicino, Canada's Public Safety Minister, said at a news conference Tuesday.

"What is driving this movement is a very small, organized group that is driven by an ideology to overthrow the government through whatever means they may wish to use," he said.

A spokesman for Mr. Mendicino declined to comment.

At the news conference, Mr. Mendicino noted that police in Alberta seized this week a cache of firearms, including handguns and 13 long guns, and a large quantity of ammunition in an early-morning raid targeting three trailers that were part of a blockade disrupting cross-border traffic between Coutts, Alberta, and Montana. Police said they arrested 13 people on Monday in connection with the Coutts border protests.

Mr. Mendicino said the Coutts border crossing was reopened on Tuesday.

In Ottawa, hundreds of heavy trucks and other vehicles continued to clog the streets on Tuesday, the day after Prime Minister Justin Trudeau revealed his intent to invoke emergency measures, which were immediately criticized by some rights groups and provincial leaders as overreach.

Mr. Mendicino's comments led some national security experts to call on the government to provide clarification. "I do think that it behooves the government to explain themselves, to the extent that they can, while maintaining national security," said Leah West, a national security expert at Carleton University in Ottawa.

The official order published Tuesday by the Canadian government lays out the justification for invoking extraordinary measures under the Emergencies Act, and what specific powers it will be using. The order said the government would, among other things, ban protests that police believe would lead to unlawful activity, prohibit gatherings near critical infrastructure such as border crossings, and allow authorities to commandeer tow trucks to help police remove demonstrators' vehicles.

The order said the protests in downtown Ottawa and at border crossings constitute a public-order emergency because of the threat of violence and unrest, and the disruption caused to the supply-chain network and two-way trade with the U.S.

An organizer for the main Ottawa protest group, which operates under the banner Freedom Convoy 2022, denied any plot to commit political violence.

"All we want is the Covid vaccine mandates removed," Chris Barber said. "There's never been a case for trying to overthrow the government."

The [official order](#) also contemplates measures related to financial services, as officials target protesters' source of cash. The order instructs crowdfunding websites and their payment processors to report large, suspicious donations to Canada's main finance-intelligence officials. Also, financial institutions are to inform authorities of any assets belonging to protesters, and in some instances cease providing services such as auto insurance to these individuals.

Tamara Lich, a spokeswoman for the Ottawa protesters, said the government's plan was unlikely to erode demonstrators' resolve. Ms. Lich and other protesters say they won't move until Canada drops all Covid-19 vaccine mandates and related restrictions.

“We will hold the line. There are no threats that will frighten us,” Ms. Lich said at a news conference.

Mr. Trudeau’s decision to tap emergency powers has triggered opposition from premiers of the Canadian provinces of Quebec, Alberta, and Saskatchewan, among others. However, the premier of Ontario, home to Ottawa and the recent blockade of a bridge that connects the province with the U.S., provided his blessing. “I’ll support the federal government and any proposals they have to bring law and order back to our province,” said Premier Doug Ford.

On Tuesday afternoon, people holding Canadian flags walked around parked trucks and chatted in small groups. About a block away from Parliament Hill, two concrete barriers were in the middle of the road beside a speaker playing rock music and signs that read “Hold the Line” and “Mandate Freedom.”

Johanne Fleury, 58, and her husband Yves Fleury, 59, said they joined protesters in Ottawa on Saturday after driving to the capital city from their home near Grande Prairie, Alberta, because they want an end to vaccine mandates and Covid-related restrictions. They said they didn’t want to be arrested, but hadn’t made plans to leave after the emergency measures were announced.

“These guys are planning on sticking around, and so will we,” said Mr. Fleury, who works in the trucking industry.

Security experts said they didn’t expect the protesters in Ottawa to be removed immediately, despite the additional powers announced by the government. Law-enforcement officials “will have to take some time to marshal the necessary resources and figure out how best to move against the protest,” said Wesley Wark, a senior fellow with the Center for International Governance Innovation, a think tank in Waterloo, Ontario.

Mr. Wark rejected the notion, raised by civil rights organizations and some lawyers, that the government’s plan was too far-reaching for the circumstances. “This is not martial law,” he said. “This is a surgical instrument to give police at the local level certain tools.”

Aaron Wudrick, director of the domestic policy program at the Macdonald-Laurier Institute, said the prime minister is deploying a “nuclear option” to deal with what is largely a downtown Ottawa problem, namely getting tow trucks to remove vehicles. A senior city of Ottawa official said last week that tow-truck companies on retainer with the municipality have refused to remove the trucks in downtown Ottawa because of worries about losing business once the protest ends.

Mr. Wudrick, a former lawyer, said police in Windsor were successful this past weekend in removing protesters who blocked cross-border traffic on the Ambassador Bridge, which connects Detroit with Windsor, Ontario, without the need for emergency powers. A Canadian court issued an order, at the request of the city of Windsor, granting police permission to remove the protesters, who disrupted U.S.-Canada trade for nearly a week.

“It’s more a logistical challenge than a threat to the integrity of the country,” Mr. Wudrick said. He added that he is worried that civil liberties will be compromised, especially if tow-truck operators are forced to help police. “It seems to me that compelling individuals against their will to help the government seems like a suspension of civil liberties.”

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HEADLINE	02/15 High food prices: poverty, unrest in Africa
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/decade-high-food-prices-drive-poverty-and-unrest-in-africa-11644932613?mod=hp_featst_pos3
GIST	KAMPALA, Uganda—Before dawn on a recent Tuesday morning, Prosy Komukama lined up outside a labor agency in Kampala, hoping to join a growing exodus of Ugandans seeking work in the wealthy Gulf states of the Middle East to escape the spiraling cost of living.

“I would like to stay in Uganda but there are no jobs and it’s not just me,” says the former schoolteacher, gesturing to the other young women crowded outside the compound’s 10-foot brick walls. “Most of us don’t have any options. Food and rent are basically unaffordable.”

Parts of Africa are [contending with a wave of inflation](#) that is, by some measures, [even worse than the supply shocks](#) cascading around the rest of the world.

[Food prices are at their highest levels in over a decade](#), according to the United Nations’ Food and Agriculture Organization, compounding the plight of some 40 million people thrown into poverty by [the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic](#) and its accompanying lockdowns.

That is creating a food crisis that threatens to spill over into unrest. In some places, it is already driving people to emigrate.

Over the past 12 months, some 100,000 Ugandans—including teachers, accountants and social workers—have migrated to the Gulf, according to government data. [That flow could pick up pace as prices track higher](#), undermining what had been one of Africa’s economic success stories.

In recent years the percentage of people in Uganda living below the poverty level fell to around a fifth of its 46 million people, down from over half in the 2000s. But prices, already spooked by rising fuel costs, are being pushed higher, jumping by almost a third so far this year, putting many staples out of reach for millions of people.

In Malawi, one of Africa’s more established democracies, the local currency has lost around a 10th of its value against the dollar in the past year, pushing inflation into double digits, reaching 11.5% in December. Authorities have arrested more than 1,000 people in recent weeks during protests at rising costs.

The causes of soaring food prices are varied.

In Uganda, new Covid-19 testing requirements along its borders are causing transport delays. Trucks have been backed up for weeks along the border with Kenya since the rules came into force at the beginning of the year, hobbling the supply of basic foods and cooking fuel. Nighttime curfews have caused similar disruptions in other places, says Sebastian Spio-Garbrah, a Ghana-based analyst at risk consulting firm DaMina Advisors, and, with [vaccination rates at around 11% across the continent](#), it may take some time for the situation to improve.

“Up to now, many African countries have not yet fully reopened their land borders, this has greatly curtailed cross-border movements and trade,” Mr. Spio-Garbrah said. “Many people who depend on cross-border trade have been out of business for a long time.”

Other factors are deeper rooted. Most African nations are net food importers, meaning that any increases in global food prices have a significant effect on the continent’s 1.4 billion people, the majority of whom spend up to 60% of their income on imported staples such as rice, corn and pasta.

Over the past two decades, more Africans have become heavily dependent on imported food, tripling the food import bill to \$35 billion in 2020, according to the World Bank, leaving them vulnerable to the rising cost of shipping food globally.

In some areas, notably the Horn of Africa, drought has returned, amplified by conflicts in Ethiopia and elsewhere. Sudan has seen inflation surpass 300%. The upheaval has drawn growing numbers of people to antigovernment blockades, hobbling seaports and border crossings as the military-run country slides further into crisis after [the ouster of its autocratic leader](#), Omar al-Bashir, in 2019. In neighboring South Sudan, some 7.4 million people are in need of food aid. Armed groups routinely target U.N. stores to steal food, pushing up prices in the local market.

Farther west, price surges have added to unrest simmering across the Sahel, the arid band stretching across the southern reaches of the Sahara. The U.N. says food prices are nearly 40% higher than other parts of the world and that some 14 million people are facing a serious food crisis, exacerbated by a growing Islamist insurgencies in the north. [Coups have dislodged governments](#) in Mali and Burkina Faso in recent months as the fighting has worsened.

There are signs that supply-chain problems are beginning to subside in some parts of the world, despite high headline inflation numbers. A new measure of supply blockages developed by economists at the Federal Reserve Bank of New York showed a record level of strain in the economic system in November, but a decline in December and January. They suggested that bottlenecks, while still historically severe, might start to ease in the coming months.

It may take longer for African countries to see an improvement, with some now reassessing their dependence on imports.

“Overcoming most of those shocks requires fixing the systems for building domestic productive capacity. That is our goal,” Malawi’s President Lazarus Chakwera said recently. “I am the first to admit that the cost of living has gone up.”

Meanwhile, a vicious circle is developing. High prices are leading to the kind of instability that in turn is driving prices higher still.

“We are sitting on something very explosive,” said Arif Husain, chief economist at the U.N.’s World Food Program, who says 120 million people across the continent are now [facing a food crisis](#).

The U.S. military, which has been working to shore up weakened governments to fight insurgencies and respond to crises, has begun flagging the dangers more publicly. This month, the U.S. military commander in Africa, General Stephen J. Townsend, said unrest and coups in the region are putting Washington’s security assistance at risk, adding to the downward spiral.

Those who might be able to leave, such as Ms. Komukama in Kampala, are trying to secure work elsewhere. She hasn’t had a stable job for two years after schools were shut because of Covid-19 and owes her landlord six months rent. Some 300,000 Ugandans have left for the Gulf in recent years.

“I just have to get out,” she said. “I have already suffered enough.

Others have fewer options. In parts of the Sahel, as volatile as it is dry, some farmers have abandoned their crops to rot under the weight of worsening rebel attacks.

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HEADLINE	02/15 Hong Kong health system overwhelmed
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/hong-kong-hospital-wards-overflow-as-omicron-defies-zero-covid-policies-11644937247?mod=hp_listb_pos3
GIST	<p>HONG KONG—As spiraling Omicron cases overwhelm Hong Kong’s health system, officials doubled down on their zero-Covid strategy on Tuesday by commandeering thousands of apartments and hotel rooms to isolate infected residents.</p> <p>Wards at public hospitals have begun to overflow, with reports of children being turned away as pediatric isolation beds ran out. Despite the strain, just a fraction of those being treated or isolated were in critical condition, and Hong Kong officials urged Covid-19-positive residents—previously subject to immediate hospitalization regardless of symptoms or vaccination status—to avoid emergency rooms if their symptoms are mild.</p>

Officials acknowledged that they were struggling to keep up with testing suspected cases across the city. There were more than 1,600 confirmed new infections reported on Tuesday. While this was lower than Monday's record 2,071 tally, 5,400 more suspected cases awaited verification.

While much of the world continues to open up despite the global spread of the coronavirus, Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam told residents to prepare for further tightening of what are already among the world's most stringent anti-Covid-19 restrictions. The containment measures have so far failed to stop accelerating infections of [the less deadly Omicron strain](#).

The pace and severity of the outbreak, the biggest since the pandemic began, has outgrown the city's capacity, Mrs. Lam said. "We cannot surrender to the virus. This is not an option," she said.

On Wednesday, Chinese President Xi Jinping was quoted in Hong Kong's pro-Beijing press urging the city government to take primary responsibility in tackling the outbreak and reining it in as soon as possible.

Hong Kong is adhering to [Beijing's goal of eliminating infections](#), though it has for now ruled out a citywide lockdown of the kind that has been used by authorities on the mainland to stamp out outbreaks. The city has called for help from mainland authorities to boost testing and build medical facilities to counter the Omicron wave.

On Tuesday, the city's hospital authority said more than 4,100 patients were in isolation or treatment for Covid-19, eight of them in critical condition. Eight people have died in the latest wave of infections.

Experts said the figures likely don't reflect the full extent of cases in Hong Kong because of the backlog in testing capacity, with the highly contagious Omicron variant quickly overwhelming the government's ability to stick with its longstanding policy of isolating positive cases in hospital wards and quarantining close contacts.

The government will secure 3,000 apartments at newly built public housing estates and up to 10,000 hotel rooms to confine the growing number of cases, officials said. They will also designate seven new clinics for treatment.

Wards at the city's public hospitals were operating at close to full capacity on Monday night, official data show, with more than half a dozen hospitals either at or exceeding their limits. Images of patients at one swamped hospital waiting outside on gurneys for treatment quickly spread through social media, heightening public concerns.

"We have to move to a model in which we are promoting home isolation, which is essentially the de facto strategy at this point," said Karen Grépin, an associate professor at the University of Hong Kong's School of Public Health. She cautioned that it isn't clear that the city has the infrastructure to keep such large numbers of people isolated at home. "Without proper support and care, it's going to be very dangerous," she said.

Hong Kong's No. 2 leader, John Lee, traveled across the city's northern border to Shenzhen over the weekend to discuss support measures from the mainland Chinese government. Though the specific nature of the cooperation hasn't been revealed, officials said Hong Kong would form task forces that would coordinate with mainland officials on virus control.

Roughly a month into its fifth wave of Covid-19 infections, Hong Kong has quickly become the center of the worst outbreak in Chinese territory since the coronavirus emerged in central China more than two years ago. The wave of mostly Omicron infections halted a monthslong stretch of virtually no locally transmitted cases, dashing hopes that the Asian financial hub would soon reopen its borders with mainland China and eventually with the rest of the world.

	<p>Though officials have instituted the city's tightest virus-control measures to date in recent weeks, they said no citywide lockdown is planned. Current restrictions include a ban on dining out after 6 p.m., closures of gyms, bars, hair salons and other establishments and halts on flights to nine countries including the U.S. and the U.K. A rule barring the unvaccinated from supermarkets and shopping malls starts Feb. 24.</p> <p>Hong Kong officials have locked down neighborhoods and housing estates where outbreaks have been especially acute, but haven't instituted harsher measures that have successfully tamped outbreaks in the mainland. Many experts doubt whether the city has the infrastructure to maintain more comprehensive lockdowns.</p> <p>Another obstacle for city leaders remains the low vaccination rate among elderly residents, who are most vulnerable to severe Covid-19 symptoms. Overall, 75% of residents have received two doses of a vaccine, but for those in their 70s the figure stands at 55%, while for those 80 and above it is 26%.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/15 Tyson to ease mask rules at some facilities
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/15/world/covid-19-tests-cases-vaccine#tyson-foods-mask-mandate
GIST	<p>Tyson Foods, one of the first national employers to mandate Covid vaccines for its workers, is moving to ease mask requirements for its employees as the number of coronavirus cases in the United States falls.</p> <p>The meatpacking giant said on Tuesday that fully vaccinated workers at "some facilities" could begin to remove their masks at work. It joined companies like Walmart and states like New York that have moved to loosen restrictions in hopes of achieving a new normal in the absence of revised national guidelines.</p> <p>"Due to our many efforts and, most importantly, our enterprisewide vaccinated status, we've seen lower rates of Covid-19 infection, as well as extremely low rates of serious illness at Tyson," Tom Brower, the company's senior vice president of health and safety, wrote in a memo to employees.</p> <p>"And in recent weeks the number of active cases at Tyson has declined significantly," he added.</p> <p>A spokesman for Tyson said the company has "had productive and ongoing conversations with union representatives about the policy change."</p> <p>Tyson has 120,000 workers in more than a dozen states. The long hours they spend working in tight quarters make them particularly susceptible to the virus. And the company was criticized early in the pandemic for failing to do enough to protect its workers from the coronavirus, which killed more than 100 of its employees.</p> <p>Slaughterhouses became hot spots for the coronavirus as it spread, posing a serious challenge to meat production. In April 2020, President Donald J. Trump said the slaughtering and processing of beef, chicken and pork was "critical infrastructure," indicating the administration was allowing the plants to remain open despite a growing number of deaths among their workers. The order followed weeks of industry lobbying led by Tyson.</p> <p>A recent congressional report said that at a Tyson plant in Amarillo, Texas, inspectors had observed that many employees were working with "saturated" masks. At a pork plant in Waterloo, Iowa, dozens of workers fell ill and three died. Local officials, including the county sheriff, said the company initially refused their requests to shut down the plant in the spring of 2020.</p> <p>Tyson says it has spent more than \$810 million on coronavirus safety measures and new on-site medical services. It conducted plantwide coronavirus testing and hired its first chief medical officer.</p> <p>In August, the company announced a vaccine requirement for its packing houses and poultry plants, many of which are in the South and Midwest, where resistance to the vaccines has been high. By November, more than 96 percent of its work force was vaccinated.</p>

	<p>Tyson defines fully vaccinated as two doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna shots or one dose of the Johnson & Johnson shot, Mr. Brower said Tuesday. The company has hosted more than 100 clinics offering booster shots, he said, and it continues to “strongly encourage” booster shots for employees.</p> <p>The number of coronavirus cases has declined about 80 percent nationally since its peak in January, to a national average of 155,000 per day, about the same as it was in late December.</p> <p>Tyson’s easing of its mask rules is conditioned on local and other applicable laws, as well as federal regulations, which require the continued use of masks at certain facilities, depending on the transmission rate, Mr. Brower said. Tyson plans to inform employees soon which plants and offices will be affected by the change.</p> <p>It is also reviewing — and considering adjusting — guidelines for social distancing and testing.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/15 Coachella: no masks, no vaccines
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/15/world/covid-19-tests-cases-vaccine#coachella-masks-vaccines-covid
GIST	<p>When the Coachella outdoor music festival returns for the first time in two years this April, performers will be greeted by a sea of unmasked — and potentially unvaccinated — fans, as the struggling concert industry stirs back to life.</p> <p>On Tuesday, organizers said that attendees will not be required to wear masks or be vaccinated or tested for the coronavirus at the Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival, which drew up to 125,000 fans a day to Southern California and was one of the biggest music festivals of the pre-pandemic era.</p> <p>“There is no guarantee, express or implied, that those attending the festival will not be exposed to Covid-19,” Goldenvoice, a division of the global concert giant AEG Live, said on the Coachella website.</p> <p>Goldenvoice noted, however, that the festival’s Covid policies may change “in accordance with applicable public health conditions.”</p> <p>Goldenvoice also said on Tuesday that Stagecoach, a country music festival in Southern California, would have no requirements for guests to be masked, vaccinated or tested. The festival was set to run for three days at the end of April and the beginning of May.</p> <p>It has been a turbulent two years for the concert and touring industries, as a number of events were canceled because of the virus. In the last year, since the Covid vaccine became widely available, organizers have grappled with decisions over whether to hold the events at all and whether to require masks, vaccines and testing.</p> <p>Over four days last summer, the Lollapalooza music festival in Chicago ran at full capacity, with its 400,000 attendees being required to show either proof of vaccination or a negative Covid test. According to data released by the city after the festival, infection rates among the concertgoers were very low.</p> <p>Coachella did not run in 2020 or 2021, and was canceled three times over the pandemic, including a rescheduled date in the fall of 2020.</p> <p>Before the pandemic, Coachella, which is widely seen as a bellwether for the multibillion-dollar touring business, had put on a show every year since 1999 at the Empire Polo Club in Indio. It typically runs over two weekends in April.</p> <p>The organizers of Coachella announced in January, after weeks of speculation, that the festival would be back this year. It is set to be headlined by Billie Eilish, Harry Styles and Kanye West.</p>

HEADLINE	02/15 San Francisco school board recall; 3 ousted
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/16/us/san-francisco-school-board-recall.html
GIST	<p>In a recall election fueled by pandemic angst and anger, San Francisco voters ousted three members of the Board of Education on Tuesday, closing a bitter chapter in the city's politics that was rife with infighting, accusations of racism and a flurry of lawsuits.</p> <p>More than 70 percent of voters supported the recall of each member when initial results were released just before 9 p.m. Pacific time, and one of the board members conceded defeat. Those votes made up about one-quarter of registered voters in the city, and turnout was not expected to be considerably higher.</p> <p>The vote stripped the members, Alison Collins, Gabriela López and Faauuga Moliga, of their positions on the seven-person board, which Ms. Lopez served as president. They will be replaced by members chosen by Mayor London Breed.</p> <p>"It's the people rising up in revolt in San Francisco and saying it's unacceptable to abandon your responsibility to educate our children," said Siva Raj, a San Francisco parent of public school students who helped lead the signature campaign to put the recall election on the ballot.</p> <p>The recall was a victory for parents who were angered that the district spent time deciding whether to rename a third of its schools last year instead of focusing on reopening them. It also appeared to be a demonstration of Asian American electoral power, a galvanizing moment for Chinese voters in particular who turned out in unusually large numbers for the election.</p> <p>In echoes of debates in other cities, many Chinese voters were incensed when the school board introduced a lottery admission system for Lowell High School, the district's most prestigious institution, abolishing requirements primarily based on grades and test scores. A judge last year ruled that the board had violated procedures in making the change.</p> <p>"The voters of this city have delivered a clear message," Ms. Breed, who supported the recall, said in a statement on Tuesday night.</p> <p>The landslide result is already being analyzed for its implications for the city's upcoming elections.</p> <p>District Attorney Chesa Boudin, a progressive prosecutor, faces a recall election in June fueled by moderate San Franciscans worried about a spike in property crimes and hate crimes during the coronavirus pandemic. Ms. Breed is running for re-election next year.</p> <p>On Tuesday, one of the ousted board members, Mr. Moliga, posted on social media that it had been an honor to serve the city. "It appears we were unsuccessful at defeating my recall," he wrote. "We fought hard and ran a great campaign."</p> <p>"There are many more fights ahead of us," he added.</p> <p>In a city with more dogs than children, school board elections in San Francisco have for decades been obscure sideshows to the more high-profile political contests.</p> <p>That changed with the pandemic — data released by the district suggests that remote learning increased racial achievement gaps — and the profusion of controversies that plagued the board.</p> <p>The district captured national headlines last year for its botched and in some cases historically inaccurate effort to rename 44 public schools.</p>

The targeted schools carry the names of a range of historical figures including Abraham Lincoln and the three other presidents chiseled into Mount Rushmore; Spanish conquerors such as Vasco Núñez de Balboa; [John Muir](#), the naturalist and author; and Paul Revere, the Revolutionary War figure.

After a barrage of criticism, including from Ms. Breed, the board put the renaming process on hold. A judge ruled that the board had violated a California law on open meetings in its proceedings.

Criticism of the board grew stronger, while signature gathering for the recall effort was already underway, when controversial tweets written by Ms. Collins, the board's vice president, were discovered. In them, she said Asian Americans were like slaves who benefited from working inside a slave owner's house — a comparison that Asian American groups and many city leaders called racist.

The board voted to strip Ms. Collins of her vice presidency, which prompted her to sue members of the board and the district for \$87 million. A judge dismissed the case.

David Lee, a political science lecturer at San Francisco State University, said the combination of the tweets and the changes to the admission policies at Lowell had empowered Asian American voters.

"It's been an opportunity for the Chinese community to flex its muscles," Mr. Lee said. "The community is reasserting itself."

Asian American voters had punched below their weight in San Francisco in recent years, making up about 18 percent of active voters in recent elections — well below their 34 percent share in the city overall. But supporters of Tuesday's recall election say Asian Americans played an outsized role.

Mr. Raj, the San Francisco parent, pointed to strong turnout in neighborhoods with large Asian populations as well as a relatively high return rate among people who requested a Chinese-language ballot.

Ann Hsu, a San Francisco resident with two high school students in the public school system, helped register more than 500 Chinese residents in the months before the election. Education, she said, was a powerful issue.

"That's been ingrained in Chinese culture for thousands and thousands of years," she said.

Ms. Hsu said she had observed some of the inner workings of the district in her role as a P.T.A. president of a high school as well as the chair of a Citizens' Bond Oversight Committee, a body that oversees the district's use of money raised through bonds. The oversight committee was formed last year after a whistle-blower notified the city attorney's office that the school district had failed to create the board, which is required by law.

"The board is incompetent," Ms. Hsu said.

Meredith W. Dodson, the executive director of the San Francisco Parent Coalition, a group formed during the pandemic to pressure the district to reopen schools, called the recall campaign a powerful demonstration of parental activism.

"We can never go back to the previous world where parents weren't organized and weren't lifting up their concerns together," she said.

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HEADLINE	02/15 Protesters leave Alberta border crossing
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/15/world/canada-protests-news#coutts-alberta-border-protest
GIST	Traffic began flowing again at another Canada border crossing early Tuesday morning, after protesters began leaving the site, in Coutts, Alberta, following several arrests and the seizure of a large cache of weapons and ammunition, the police said.

A stockpile of weapons had been discovered by the police in trailers in Alberta on Monday. A small protest cell in the province had been prepared to use violence to maintain a blockade, the police reported. Thirteen people were arrested over the course of the day.

There has been little physical violence associated with the protests, and authorities successfully cleared another blocked border crossing, at the Ambassador Bridge between Windsor, Ontario, and Detroit.

Police officials said that in the early hours of Monday, it had searched three trailers linked to a criminal organization connected to the protests and seized weapons, including 13 long guns, handguns, a machete, multiple sets of body armor, a large quantity of ammunition and magazines.

In another example of the militant mind-set of a small segment of the protest, the police said that on Sunday evening a large farm tractor and a semi truck, both involved in the blockade, had attempted to ram a police vehicle. They said the driver had been identified and “taken into custody.”

“The Alberta R.C.M.P. wants to emphasize that our primary goal throughout this event has been and will continue to be the safety of the public, as well as our officers,” it said, calling the protesters to end the Coutts blockade.

Jason Kenney, the premier of Alberta, expressed relief that no one had been hurt by the group, which appeared to have violent intent. “This is extremely concerning,” he said. While the vast majority of protesters were law-abiding, he said a “small cell of people” had wanted to proceed in a “dark and dangerous direction.”

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HEADLINE	02/15 Canadian PM invokes emergency powers
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/15/world/canada-protests-news#trudeau-takes-on-protesters-fund-raising-and-bank-accounts-with-the-emergency-powers-invocation
GIST	<p>When Prime Minister Justin Trudeau declared a national emergency over the truck demonstration on Monday, the action had a familiar ring for residents of the beleaguered capital. It was the third such proclamation since the protest rolled into town.</p> <p>The two previous declarations, by the mayor of Ottawa on Feb. 6 and the premier of Ontario on Feb. 11, both conspicuously failed to evict the entrenched truck encampment, unsnarl traffic and allow businesses to reopen. With now another such announcement, many in Canada are left wondering, will anything be any different this time?</p> <p>Several experts in constitutional law and policing issues said the most extraordinary elements of Mr. Trudeau’s invocation were not the powers extended to law enforcement — which were not much different than what had already been granted — but the variety of measures that strike at both fund-raising for the protests, which have been deemed by the police a criminal activity, as well as the demonstrators’ personal and business bank accounts.</p> <p>While the government has yet to present detailed orders, Chrystia Freeland, the deputy prime minister and finance minister, said on Monday that all online fund-raising services operating in Canada, regardless of where they are based, will have to register with Canada’s financial intelligence agency, which analyzes transactions for signs of money laundering or terrorist related activity.</p> <p>Not all of them, however, are likely to comply. After the protesters were cut off by GoFundMe, they moved their appeal to GiveSendGo. When an Ontario judge last week ordered the seizure of several million dollars raised through that platform, the online service defiantly posted on Twitter that “Canada has absolutely ZERO jurisdiction over how we manage our funds.”</p> <p>But Vanessa Iafolia, a criminologist and financial crime consultant in Halifax, Nova Scotia, who studies money laundering, said that the government has a way around that. There is a long chain of companies</p>

that process the payments for all fund-raising sites. That chain, she said, eventually leads to banks and other financial institutions in Canada that are, since the emergency declaration, now required to cut off any payments to and from crowdfunding sites that choose not to follow the new emergency regulations.

While Dr. Iafolla said she believes that the rules will likely choke major fund-raising efforts in short order, she is concerned about Ms. Freeland's announcement that banks can now freeze or close personal and business accounts belonging to protesters. That, she said, could ultimately lead to many, if not most of those people being completely shut out of the banking system and "economically starved."

"I don't like the precedent that it sets," she said. "It could give life to future governments to do the same thing to protesters of other political persuasions. So environmental protesters, Indigenous protesters could also be at risk in future."

Nomi Claire Lazar, a professor of public and international affairs at the University of Ottawa who studies emergency laws, said that she finds the government's proposal so severe that it may be more of a scare tactic to frighten protesters into leaving than a measure it actually intends to enforce.

"It's communicating to the convoy members that this is now a risk that they're taking, but that the power would be used very sparingly," she said.

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HEADLINE	02/15 IRS commissioner: 'enormous challenges'
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/feb/15/irs-blames-pandemic-congress-failure-process-taxpa/
GIST	<p>IRS Commissioner Charles P. Rettig acknowledged Tuesday that the tax agency faces "enormous challenges" in providing service this year, but he said taxpayers should direct their anger at Congress for not providing enough money.</p> <p>Mr. Rettig said the COVID-19 pandemic also took a toll but cost-cutting has starved his agency of the employees and technology it needs to process returns, answer questions and chase after "ultra-wealthy" tax cheats.</p> <p>"Today, millions of people are still waiting for prior years' returns to be processed and refund checks to arrive in the mail while preparing for their upcoming tax filing," the commissioner wrote in an op-ed for Yahoo Money. "While we can't immediately solve these significant issues, our employees are doing everything they can, and I am committed to returning to normal inventory levels before next year."</p> <p>The commissioner defended his agency after The Washington Post reported last week that the IRS had a backlog of 24 million unprocessed returns from last year. Many of those include refunds owed to taxpayers that have been blocked for months, denying Americans their money.</p> <p>IRS officials also sustained a black eye this month when they had to retreat on plans to subject Americans to facial recognition checks if they wanted to access key online services such as their IRS transcripts or payment plans.</p> <p>The Government Accountability Office last week reported that the agency lost hundreds of millions of dollars over the past few years because it wouldn't pay \$600,000 to fix a letter-opening machine at a service center in Kansas City, Missouri. Without an automated system, letters containing payments weren't opened on time, so the government couldn't file the checks quickly and lost interest payments it should have collected.</p> <p>Mr. Rettig said taxpayers will suffer for the agency's struggles.</p> <p>With the pandemic affecting services, he said, the IRS received 120 million calls for assistance during filing season last year and was able to answer less than 20% of them. He signaled that is likely to continue this year.</p>

Tax filing day is April 18.

The agency is taking some steps to work through its problems.

The IRS announced last week that it would stop sending some automated notices to taxpayers, such as warnings about unpaid balances, looming fines or payments that didn't match filed returns. The agency said it realized in some cases that returns might be sitting in the backlog.

Lawmakers on Capitol Hill said that was a good first step and acknowledged challenges from the pandemic. Still, they said, the IRS is failing at basic communications with taxpayers.

In a letter this week to Mr. Rettig and Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen, 30 Republican senators said they are hearing from constituents who can't find out whether their returns were received or whether they should refile.

The senators urged the IRS to give the public processing times and expectations so taxpayers know when to start worrying that communications haven't been received.

The senators told the agency to stop issuing liens or levies "for a meaningful period of time" and to halt collections until the agency opens all of its mail to see what sort of abatement requests might be waiting.

Trouble at the IRS is nothing new.

In the early part of the last decade, as the agency dealt with fallout from the tea party targeting scandal, the agency said Congress was stripping its funding and leaving it unable to answer the phone.

By 2015, the agency said it could answer only 37% of customer service calls. Congress pumped more money into customer service, and the rate of answered calls rose to 73% in 2016.

Last year, amid the pandemic, a record 282 million calls were placed to the IRS. The agency answered 32 million of them, or 11%.

Mr. Rettig said the IRS now has the same number of employees as it had in the 1970s despite a 60% increase in the country's population and new demands on the agency. Electronic filing has helped cut the burden, but nearly 10% of returns are still filed manually, which he said is "time-intensive."

He said the agency's budget has dropped 20% over the past decade. The trims to personnel have been even deeper in some cases.

In 2010, the IRS had 18,582 customer service slots, 13,879 revenue agents and 6,042 revenue officers. In 2020, it had 11,027 customer service representatives, 8,346 revenue agents and 3,040 revenue officers.

After a meeting with Mr. Rettig on Tuesday, Sen. Ron Wyden, Oregon Democrat and chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, blamed a "decade-long Republican campaign to gut the IRS and shield wealthy tax cheats."

"Rebuilding this agency so it can both ensure taxpayers pay taxes already owed and better serve hard-working taxpayers is a top priority," he said.

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HEADLINE	02/15 New sanction rules hit dozens China firms
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/feb/15/new-us-sanction-rules-hit-dozens-chinese-firms-lin/

GIST

The Treasury Department on Tuesday issued regulations to implement sanctions on 59 Chinese military companies aimed at blocking Beijing from building up its armed forces with cash obtained from U.S. financial markets.

The regulations prohibit all U.S. financial and stock companies and individual investors from engaging in securities trading that in any way financially benefits the named Chinese enterprises or their executives. The companies were designated as military entities earlier by the Pentagon.

The companies include a number of major Chinese aerospace and telecommunications firms, including Huawei Technologies, that have already been targeted by the U.S. government for its suspected links to Chinese intelligence services.

The regulations call for either civil or criminal penalties for anyone who violates sanctions contained in a November 2020 executive order by former President Donald Trump, as well as additional sanctions in an order signed by President Biden in June.

The sanctions target parts of the military industrial complex that are closely aligned with the civilian economy in China, in what Beijing has dubbed a “fusion strategy.” The Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Controls said that even more detailed sanctions controls will be put in place later, the department said in announcing the rules Tuesday.

The Trump administration’s November 2020 order listed 31 Chinese military companies said Beijing is “increasingly exploiting United States capital to resource and to enable the development and modernization of its military, intelligence and other security apparatuses.”

“At the same time, those companies raise capital by selling securities to United States investors that trade on public exchanges both here and abroad, lobbying U.S. index providers and funds to include these securities in market offerings, and engaging in other acts to ensure access to U.S. capital,” the order said. “In that way, the [People’s Republic of China] exploits United States investors to finance the development and modernization of its military.”

Cutting off access to U.S. capital markets seeks to limit China’s ability to bolster military, intelligence and other security agencies that are using the “ostensibly private” economy, the order said.

The Biden order expanded the sanctions to include companies involved in what critics say are human rights abuses by the communist regime, such as the repression of ethnic Uyghurs in Xinjiang. Mr. Biden said in his June 3 order that additional sanctions were needed to curb Chinese use of surveillance technology to facilitate repression or serious human rights abuses.

Roger W. Robinson Jr., a former National Security Council official in the Reagan administration, was one of the first to highlight the dangers posed by allowing China’s defense firms access to American capital markets. Mr. Robinson said the military penetration of U.S. capital markets was carried out quietly since at least 2012.

A sizable number of Chinese corporations with military links were until recently active in the debt and equity portfolios of millions of ordinary American investors, many of whom are unaware of the connections, Mr. Robinson said in a recent interview.

Among them are contractors for the People’s Liberation Army, construction companies that built military bases on disputed islands in the South China Sea, advanced weapons manufacturers, cyber hackers and companies selling military goods to North Korea and Iran.

“The penetration of the U.S. debt and equity markets by Chinese bad actors represents a national security peril, both in terms of serving as an important source of funding for some of China’s most ominous security threats to vital U.S. and allied security interests, and, over time, giving rise to a massive new China lobby of beholden U.S. investors,” Mr. Robinson said.

	<p>In March 2018, China Shipbuilding Industry Co., one of the 59 sanctioned companies, announced plans to build the PLA's first nuclear-powered aircraft carrier as part of Beijing's large-scale naval forces buildup. Shortly after the announcement, Mr. Robinson revealed, China Shipbuilding issued a \$1 billion bond in the German bond market in Frankfurt timed to completion of the carrier.</p> <p>The \$1 billion bond offering will almost certainly assist in financing construction of a new nuclear carrier, with some of the funds raised coming from U.S. institutional investors, he said.</p> <p>Another company on the list, state-owned China United Network Communications Group Co. Ltd, known as China Unicom, raised \$5.7 billion in an initial public offering on the New York Stock Exchange and Hong Kong Stock Exchange in June 2000. Currently, hundreds of millions of dollars of its stock is held by U.S. state pension funds, Mr. Robinson said.</p> <p>China Unicom has built the PLA's vast network of fiber-optic communications, "smart base" stations and other high-technology gear.</p> <p>In the past, China has sought to skirt U.S. financial sanctions by changing the names of the companies involved in military development.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/15 US intelligence agencies face crucial test
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/15/us/politics/us-russia-putin-intelligence.html
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON — At the height of the Russian effort in 2016 to manipulate the U.S. presidential election, the C.I.A. had a secret weapon: a mole with some access to the inner circle of Russia's president, Vladimir V. Putin, who was able to inform Washington about how the master tactician was thinking about his next move.</p> <p>That agent was extracted from Russia in 2017, leaving the United States largely blind, for a while, to Mr. Putin's thinking. Now, after five years of slowly rebuilding access to the highest ranks of the Kremlin, America's intelligence agencies face a crucial test: deciphering whether Mr. Putin will use the more than 150,000 troops he has amassed near the Ukrainian border to invade, or merely to give him leverage as he dangles the prospect of a diplomatic settlement.</p> <p>In interviews with officials from the United States and its closest allies, it is clear the United States and Britain once again have windows into Mr. Putin's thinking. Some intelligence conclusions are reached through electronic intercepts, others bolstered by his periodic conversations with President Biden, which officials say have proven helpful in understanding Mr. Putin's worldview — and his transactional nature.</p> <p>Mr. Putin's calculus, according to a U.S. official, is likely shifting as he weighs the changing costs of an invasion and he assesses what he could get from negotiations. Several officials note that Mr. Putin has a history of waiting until the last possible moment to make a decision, constantly re-evaluating his options.</p> <p>Not surprisingly, American officials will not say how they know what Mr. Putin is thinking, anxious to preserve their current sources.</p> <p>Knowing the intention of any autocratic leader is difficult, but Mr. Putin, who began his career as a K.G.B. officer, is a particular challenge. Because he avoids electronic devices, oftentimes bans note-takers, and tells his aides little, there is a limit to how much an intelligence agency can learn about his intentions and thinking.</p>

“We do not understand fundamentally, none of us do, what is inside President Putin’s head, and so we cannot make any guess about where all of this is headed,” Julianne Smith, the U.S. ambassador to NATO, told reporters on Tuesday.

One senior official who has met with Russian counterparts in an effort to defuse the current crisis said recently that the U.S. delegation came away with the sense that Mr. Putin’s representatives were taking a hard line because they did not know what their boss wanted to do.

American officials are poring over intelligence — both analytic reports and raw material — trying to answer a critical question: how Mr. Putin assesses his likelihood of success.

Both American and British officials say that a key element of their analyses is a shared conclusion that something has changed in Mr. Putin’s assessment of Russia’s relative status in the world. After spending heavily on his military, he now believes Russia is in the strongest position to coerce Ukraine — and the rest of Europe — since the fall of the Soviet Union. His financial reserves have greatly improved Moscow’s ability to withstand sanctions.

More recently, he has benefited from high gas and oil prices — and discovered that the more he threatens war, the higher those prices go.

And as Germany and other nations have looked at the wildly high cost of replacing Russian energy sources should they be cut off, it has made some European leaders more eager to negotiate a solution that would avoid needing to impose sanctions. It is extortion, one European negotiator said, while noting that Mr. Putin thinks like an extortionist.

Mr. Putin also has the benefit of time. He does not face voters for another two and a half years, potentially allowing him to recover from any domestic criticism that could arise from a punishing conflict — or the sanctions that might follow.

While there is broad agreement of that analysis in intelligence circles, former intelligence officials warn that those trying to predict the moves of a leader like Mr. Putin need to proceed with humility about how much they do not know.

“Analysts understand how Putin thinks, his grievances and his anger at the West and the United States,” said John Sipher, a former C.I.A. officer who served in Moscow. “Now, does that mean we know what he’s going to do and when he’s going to do it? No, because to do that you have to get in his head.”

The United States has clearly developed intelligence on the Russian military’s war planning, predicting the buildup of troops weeks before it happened, exposing what officials said were Russian sabotage plots and operations meant to create a pretext for invasion.

But the United States has long found itself caught by surprise by Mr. Putin, from his decision to annex Crimea to his deployment of forces to Syria.

Interestingly, one source of insight to Mr. Putin has been conversations with the Russian president himself.

So, like a hostage negotiator, they are determined to keep him talking. Not long after William J. Burns, the C.I.A. director, visited Moscow in November to warn against an invasion of Ukraine, Mr. Biden’s aides came up with a plan of constant engagement, setting up a series of negotiations — in Brussels and Geneva, at many different levels — on the theory that while Russia was talking with the West, airing its grievances and making its demands, it was unlikely to invade.

Paul Kolbe, who oversaw collection of Russian intelligence for the C.I.A. for many years, noted recently that “you keep them talking to try to figure out what they really want, to find another way out.”

But Mr. Kolbe, now the director of Harvard's intelligence project, added, "it made sense — unless what the gunman really wants is to shoot the hostages."

Mr. Putin wields information as a weapon, keeping his own counsel and withholding details of his planning from close aides.

When Mr. Burns visited Moscow to warn against an invasion of Ukraine, he offered details of what the United States had learned about the military planning. The disclosures appeared to catch some Russian officials off guard, as if they were less privy to Mr. Putin's planning, according to an American official briefed on the meeting.

"I like to say, Putin's not a good sharer, he didn't pass that kindergarten class" said Beth Sanner, a former top intelligence official who regularly briefed President Donald J. Trump. "He was a spy. So he's trained not to be a sharer, he's trained to elicit and manipulate."

But former intelligence officials said that the Russia bench within the C.I.A. remained strong, with numerous analysts and case officers who have devoted their careers to studying Mr. Putin. The long reign of an autocrat, said former officials, has certain advantages.

There are limits to what a government should ask its intelligence to do, said Marc E. Polymeropoulos, a former senior C.I.A. officer who oversaw operations in Europe and Russia. Intelligence agencies can provide warning, which is what they have done in recent months. Anything more can be fraught.

"Intelligence is not necessarily predictive of time and date. The intelligence community has done a pretty damn good job of providing policymakers with excellent situational awareness for them to develop policies if Russia goes one way or the other way," he said. "That's what intelligence does. Asking more of that is going to be very difficult."

Even situational awareness may be harder to come by at a moment when the Russians claim to be de-escalating while military exercises are still underway. The basic jobs of tracking Russian moves in Ukraine have been disrupted. On Tuesday, the C.I.A. closed, at least temporarily, its station in Ukraine's capital, Kyiv, a day after U.S. diplomatic personnel relocated to the western Ukrainian city of Lviv.

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HEADLINE	02/15 Complex: signaling war to avert actual war
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/15/world/europe/us-russia-ukraine-war.html
GIST	<p>As their standoff over Ukraine continues, Moscow and Washington are playing an increasingly high-stakes, increasingly complex game of signaling to try to secure their aims without firing a shot.</p> <p>Traditional diplomacy is just one component of this dance. Troop movements, sanctions warnings and legislation, embassy closures, leader summits, and intelligence leaks are all aimed, in part, at proving each country's willingness to carry out certain threats or accept certain risks.</p> <p>It is a form of high-stakes negotiation, conducted in actions as much as words, meant to settle the future of Europe just as conclusively as if decided by war, by telegraphing how a conflict would play out rather than waging it directly.</p> <p>Russia, by shifting thousands of troops from its far east to Ukraine's border, hopes to convince Washington and Kyiv that it is willing to endure a major war to secure its demands by force, so those countries are better off meeting Russian demands peacefully.</p> <p>The Biden administration, by stating that a Russian invasion may be imminent, even closing its embassy in Kyiv, and vowing economic retaliation, signals that Moscow cannot expect desperate American concessions, making further escalation less worthwhile.</p>

There have been a flurry of such gestures. Russia held Black Sea naval exercises, implying it could close off trade waters. President Biden issued joint statements with European leaders, conveying that they are not balking at American sanctions threats that would harm Europe, too.

But the more both sides try to make their threats credible, for example by relocating troops, the more they heighten the risk of a miscalculation that could careen out of control.

Each side also cultivates ambiguity about what it will or will not accept, and will or will not do, in hopes of forcing its adversary to prepare for all eventualities, spreading its energies thin.

The White House has said that President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia could decide this week whether to invade, deflating Moscow's careful murkiness, while also demonstrating, especially to cautious Europeans, that any invasion would be driven by Russia, rather than in response to some outside provocation.

On Tuesday, Moscow moved to recreate confusion, withdrawing a handful of forces even as it continued nearby war games and as Mr. Putin accused Ukraine of genocide against its native Russophone minority. By feinting simultaneously toward de-escalation and invasion on Tuesday, Moscow builds pressure on the West to prepare for both.

"This dynamic is very volatile," said Keren Yarhi-Milo, a Columbia University political scientist who studies how countries signal and maneuver amid crises.

A range of factors particular to this crisis, she added — differing political cultures, multiple audiences, rising uncertainty — "makes the signaling in this case very, very difficult."

The result is a diplomatic cacophony nearly as difficult to navigate as war itself, with stakes just as high.

Persuasion Games

With their positioning, Moscow and Washington are struggling to resolve two outstanding questions about a possible conflict, each to their benefit.

Would a Russian invasion bring Moscow more reward than downside?

And, would the West have less tolerance than Russia for the pain of Mr. Biden's proposed sanctions, and abandon them?

If Moscow can convince Washington that the answer to both is "yes," then Mr. Biden and his allies would, in theory, be forced to conclude that they are better off delivering whatever concessions will keep Russia from launching a war.

But if Washington can persuade Moscow that both answers are "no," then Mr. Putin will have every incentive to cut his losses and step back from the brink.

Mr. Putin has been ambiguous about what he would consider a successful invasion of Ukraine. And moves like his recent visit to China or his ambassadors' [bluster](#), shrugging off sanctions, signal that he is ready and able to bear the foreseeable costs.

Of course, if war were really so advantageous, it could have already begun, one of many hints that Mr. Putin may be partly bluffing, although by how much is impossible to say.

Mr. Biden, for his part, has sent weapons to Ukraine, a message that he would make any conflict more painful for Russia, and has laid out retaliatory sanctions in detail. He has implied Western unity over sanctions that may be just as much a bluff as Mr. Putin's war talk.

His administration has also [publicized](#) what it says are Russian plans to fake a justification for war, implying that any such ploy would be quickly unmasked, making it less attractive.

But threats and bluffs work best when they are backed up by action, increasing the risk of a war that neither side may truly want.

And these efforts are complicated by each side's need to persuade multiple audiences of contradictory things.

Mr. Biden must persuade Mr. Putin that Western sanctions would be automatic and severe, while also convincing Europeans, who would bear much of the cost, that sanctions would not hit them too hard or be carried out without their consent.

Similarly, Mr. Putin is seeking to position himself to Western leaders as ready for war, while convincing [war-averse](#) Russian citizens that he is being dragged into one, for example with [false claims](#) of American and Ukrainian aggression.

But Western leaders often struggle to differentiate which statements Mr. Putin intends them to take seriously and which he expects them to ignore as bluster for domestic consumption, Christopher Bort, a former U.S. intelligence official, warned [in an essay](#) for the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

The Kremlin's "torrent of falsehoods" over Ukraine, Mr. Bort added, risks persuading Western leaders that Moscow's diplomatic entrees can be ignored as cover for an invasion it has already decided to launch — potentially foreclosing an offramp from war.

Lost in Translation

"Your system is much more open than ours," said [Alexander Gabuev](#), a senior fellow at the Carnegie Moscow Center. "That produces a lot of misunderstanding."

Because Kremlin decision-making is dominated by a handful of intelligence and military officials, Mr. Gabuev said, there is a tendency to assume that Washington operates the same way.

Offhand comments by American military officers are given special weight in Moscow, while lawmakers who drive much of Washington's politics are ignored.

Such cultural misunderstandings, Mr. Gabuev added, have become considerably worse in recent years, as Washington and Moscow have [expelled](#) one another's diplomats and ended many unofficial exchanges, hampering their visibility into one another's politics.

This is not always dangerous. Many in Moscow, assuming that Mr. Biden operates like Mr. Putin, believe that Washington has ginned up the appearance of conflict with the intention of declaring a false American victory when the more reasonable Mr. Putin rolls back the deployments he has insisted are defensive, Mr. Gabuev said.

That misunderstanding significantly eases Mr. Putin's option to withdraw. And many in Russia view the West as the aggressor, and so would take an averted conflict as Mr. Putin triumphing, not surrendering.

Still, the less Washington and Moscow understand one another, the harder it will be for them to decipher each other's signals and anticipate each other's reactions.

"The Russian president's circle of trust has consolidated over time, insulating him from information that does not fit with his prior beliefs," the scholars Adam E. Casey and Seva Gunitsky [wrote in Foreign Affairs](#).

As Mr. Putin's inner circle has shrunk, they wrote, it has grown dominated by yes-men who tell him what they think he wants to hear and by security service leaders who tend to be hawkish and distrustful toward the West.

He would hardly be alone in this: [research finds](#) that strongmen leaders like him are, for just this reason, likelier to start wars and likelier to lose them.

So what Washington takes as Russian brinksmanship or bluffing, for example shrugging off sanctions threats or implying that some Ukrainians would welcome Russian liberators, may reflect sincere belief due to political dysfunction.

"Information flows to Putin are choppy at best, and sanctions are a highly technical topic that aren't even well understood in Washington," said Eddie Fishman, a top sanctions policy official in the Obama administration.

So far, both sides have avoided any obvious misreadings of each other. This may stem in part from the length of the crisis, which has allowed each capital to repeatedly telegraph its intentions and capabilities.

But that same factor — time — also creates more opportunities for a mistake as each side escalates.

"Every day that we're not resolving it, we are increasing the percentage chance that something will go wrong," said Dr. Yarhi-Milo, the international relations scholar.

"We're testing the nerves of a lot of people at the same time," she added. "It can take a really bad turn very quickly."

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HEADLINE	02/15 Fractious collaboration in Canada protests
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/15/world/canada/canada-protests-ottawa.html
GIST	<p>OTTAWA — Since the big rigs entrenched in the core of Canada's capital first pulled in nearly three weeks ago, they have arranged themselves in a semblance of order, parking in evenly spaced rows. Their drivers have stayed warm and are fed by a corps of marshaled volunteers, and though they have varying personal beliefs, they appear carefully on-message: "Freedom!" has been the repeated refrain for the past 19 days.</p> <p>It is no accident: High above the clot of trucks on Ottawa's Parliament Hill, in hotel rooms just out of the fray, are the war rooms behind the operation. From them, a team of self-appointed leaders, some with military and right-wing organizing backgrounds, have orchestrated a disciplined and highly coordinated occupation.</p> <p>They have spent the weeks huddling in conference rooms and streaming their own news conferences on social media platforms from hotel lobbies. It is a crew that includes former law enforcement officers, military veterans and conservative organizers, a sometimes fractious collaboration that has nonetheless helped to coalesce a demonstration against vaccine mandates into a force that has destabilized the city and sent shock waves throughout Canada.</p> <p>And while the main blockade that had crippled trade and stalled commercial traffic for nearly a week at the main border crossing between Canada and the United States reopened this week, the protesters in Ottawa largely haven't budged.</p> <p>Canadian officials, who do not have authority to tell the police how to operate, have become increasingly frustrated with the occupation and see the coordination not as a polished demonstration, but a dangerous threat.</p>

“What is driving this movement is a very small, organized group that is driven by an ideology to overthrow the government,” Marco Mendicino, the public safety minister, said in remarks on Tuesday. “Through whatever means they may wish to use.”

The protesters’ efforts seemed to be rewarded on Tuesday by the resignation of Ottawa’s police chief, who had faced mounting criticism for the tepid response to the demonstrations in the capital since the start of the occupation. As news of the chief’s departure reached the encampment Tuesday, jubilant honking blared through the city.

Peter Sloly, the police chief, resigned a day after Mr. Trudeau took the rare step of declaring a national public order emergency that extended more robust policing measures across the country. His invocation of the Emergencies Act also took aim at both protester fund-raising, which has been deemed a criminal activity, and the demonstrators’ personal and business bank accounts.

The new public order threatens to unravel a group already at pains to project credibility. Its underpinnings — as a hodgepodge of people suffused in counterfactual belief systems, conspiracy theories and barely bridled rage at anything seen as contrary to their mission — frequently erupt through the official veneer.

At a news conference in the Sheraton Ottawa Hotel on Monday, opened to media other than solely conservative-leaning news outlets for one of the first times, there was an air of gravitas in a room that echoed with the constant coughing of dozens of maskless supporters.

“Some of you might oppose our grievances,” Tamara Lich, one of the most visible group leaders, said to the television cameras. “However, democratic society will always have non-trivial disagreements, and righteous dissidents.”

But when a television reporter, Glen McGregor, asked about a large cache of weapons found that day at a protest in Alberta, others in the conference room became enraged, shoving the reporter and calling for his ejection with yells of “how dare you!” as Mr. McGregor and his television crew fled into the street. Tom Marazzo, a spokesman, later defended the action.

What messaging discipline exists comes from the early public face of the effort, Ms. Lich, said Jay Hill, the interim leader of the Maverick Party, a small right-of-center group based out of Calgary, Alberta, created to promote the separation of Canada’s three western Prairie Provinces from the rest of the country. Ms. Lich has deep ties to the group.

Even before the convoy assembled, its messaging was Ms. Lich’s preoccupation, according to Mr. Hill, who said she called him several times even before arriving in Ottawa to strategize.

“We had a number of discussions about staying on message, about the need in this modern-day world of politics to have a very clearly defined message that is understandable and simple, a message that people can grasp hold of and run with,” he said. “Tamara clearly understands that.”

Ms. Lich played a leading role in organizing a GoFundMe campaign for the protests that raised \$7.8 million before the crowdfunding site shut it down after receiving “police reports of violence and other unlawful activity,” GoFundMe said.

Previously, Ms. Lich worked as a personal trainer in Medicine Hat, Alberta, a town once dubbed “Hell’s Basement,” by Rudyard Kipling for its location on top of huge natural gas field.

Zach Smithson, an employee at Body Building Depot Fitness Emporium, where Ms. Lich used to work, said she has since become the talk of the town.

“I think we are all very proud of her,” he said.

Ms. Lich did not respond to a call and text message requesting an interview.

B.J. Dichter, an official spokesman for the convoy, said he joined the effort after Ms. Lich sought help managing the swell of donations flowing into a GoFundMe page. Mr. Dichter has a history of spouting anti-Islamist views and once said that “political Islam” is “rotting away at our society like syphilis.” He has rejected claims of racism.

“I’m Jewish,” he told the journalist Rupa Subramanya. “I have family in mass graves in Europe. And apparently I’m a white supremacist.”

Within the occupiers’ tightly managed ground operations, there are military hallmarks, outlined and executed by the several higher-ups who have backgrounds in the armed forces and law enforcement, according to Mr. Marazzo. He said he spent 25 years in the military, and with his measured tones he is frequently deployed as the spokesman for the group.

“This was a grass-roots convoy that just left their homes and headed for Ottawa,” said Mr. Marazzo, a former instructor at Georgian College in Ontario who added that he was fired because of his anti-vaccine beliefs. “They’ve deployed to the field without really knowing who our commanding officers were, who were the platoon commander, and who were the captains — That was a team effort.”

On the ground, the organizers have established a sophisticated infrastructure that includes oversight of each occupied street by a so-called road captain, with sections divided and overseen by block captains who operate below them. The captains check in on the drivers ensconced in their cabs, delivering things like hot breakfasts — doling out so much food that some protesters said they have to turn it away.

The protesters’ coordinated responses seek to outfox law enforcement. After the police threatened to arrest people refueling the trucks last week, demonstrators filled red and yellow jerrycans with water to provide cover to those who were in fact supplying gasoline.

Now the protesters appear to operate in impunity: Every few hours, phalanxes of volunteers tow garden trolleys bearing half-dozen 20-liter gas cans to top up the drivers.

“This is what you can attribute the longevity of this movement to, it’s sheer dedication,” said Dagny Pawlak, an spokeswoman for the group. “Our organization is working around the clock.”

But while the organizers have spearheaded much of the logistics of sustaining an occupation now in its third week, it is unclear how much power they have over the demonstrators — who share a wide range of motivations and beliefs — if and when it comes time to negotiate their departure.

“They will generally speak for everybody, but everybody has their own thoughts,” said Guy Meister, a trucker from Nova Scotia who was encamped outside the Senate. That fracture became clear when word recently got out that organizers were negotiating with Ottawa’s mayor to relocate some trucks, infuriating some of the convoy.

“I have faith in them, but I’m my own person,” Mr. Meister said. “The only person that’s going to decide when I leave is me.”

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HEADLINE	02/15 Prince Andrew settles sexual abuse lawsuit
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/15/nyregion/prince-andrew-virginia-giuffre-settlement.html
GIST	Prince Andrew, the disgraced second son of Queen Elizabeth II, has settled a lawsuit brought by Virginia Giuffre, a woman who had accused him of raping her when she was a teenage victim of Andrew’s friend, the notorious sex offender Jeffrey Epstein, according to a new court filing in Manhattan on Tuesday.

The amount that Andrew, 61, will pay Ms. Giuffre is confidential, the parties said in a joint statement attached to the filing.

Andrew also “intends to make a substantial donation” to a charity “in support of victims’ rights,” the statement says.

The deal comes just weeks before Andrew was scheduled to sit for a deposition, in which he would have been questioned under oath by Ms. Giuffre’s lawyers. Andrew did not admit to any of Ms. Giuffre’s accusations against him in the statement announcing the settlement.

The [lawsuit by Ms. Giuffre](#), one of the most prominent of Mr. Epstein’s accusers, had cast a shadow over the royals at a time when Queen Elizabeth, the 95-year-old British monarch, was marking her [70th year on the throne](#). Andrew was [forced to relinquish his military titles](#) and royal charities, no longer was to use the title “His Royal Highness,” and was “not to undertake any public duties,” Buckingham Palace said in a statement last month.

In her lawsuit, Ms. Giuffre claimed that Andrew, known as the Duke of York, sexually abused her when she was under 18 at Mr. Epstein’s mansion in Manhattan and on his private island, Little St. James, in the U.S. Virgin Islands.

The suit also claimed that Andrew, Mr. Epstein and his longtime companion, Ghislaine Maxwell, had forced Ms. Giuffre to have sexual intercourse with Andrew at Ms. Maxwell’s home in London. Ms. Giuffre had feared repercussions if she disobeyed the three because of “their powerful connections, wealth and authority,” the lawsuit said.

Mr. Epstein, 66, was found [dead in August 2019 in a Manhattan jail cell](#) while awaiting trial on sex-trafficking charges. Ms. Maxwell, 60, was convicted of sex trafficking and other counts in a trial in December.

The settlement may serve as a capstone to the years of investigations and litigation that has surrounded Mr. Epstein and his associates. The Epstein saga implicated or involved people at the highest levels of celebrity and politics — including Andrew — on both sides of the ocean, spawning court cases and conspiracy theories.

Buckingham Palace declined to comment on the settlement, saying it was a matter for the Duke and his legal team. A spokesman for Andrew declined to comment on the source of funds for the settlement.

Andrew B. Brettler, a lawyer who has represented Andrew in the lawsuit, did not respond to a request for comment.

Although Andrew never faced criminal charges, his efforts to put an end to the lingering questions about his links to Mr. Epstein backfired. An interview he gave to the BBC in November 2019, several months after Mr. Epstein’s death, drew [a storm of negative reaction](#) and led him to step down from public duties.

After he issued a statement saying he was ready to help “any appropriate law enforcement agency with their investigation, if required,” Geoffrey S. Berman, then the U.S. attorney in Manhattan, who was overseeing the sex-trafficking investigation, repeatedly called out Andrew for failing to live up to that pledge.

“To date, Prince Andrew has provided [zero cooperation](#),” Mr. Berman said in January 2020, and [two months later](#), he said Andrew had “completely shut the door on voluntary cooperation.”

A spokesman for the U.S. attorney’s office declined to comment on Tuesday when asked whether Andrew was under investigation by the office.

David Boies, a lawyer for Ms. Giuffre, said the settlement with Andrew “does not in any way insulate him from any criminal liability that would otherwise exist.”

In the joint statement on Tuesday, Andrew said it was “known that Jeffrey Epstein trafficked countless young girls over many years,” and that he “regrets his association with Epstein and commends the bravery of Ms. Giuffre and other survivors in standing up for themselves and others.”

Most of the settlements reached by accusers of Mr. Epstein have been kept confidential, although the four women who testified at Ms. Maxwell’s trial each said they had received payouts, as high as \$5 million before legal fees, from a victims’ compensation fund drawn from Mr. Epstein’s estate.

Mr. Boies said the entire amount of Ms. Giuffre’s settlement with Andrew, as well as any charitable contribution Andrew makes, will go to her and the charity, noting that his firm had represented her pro bono, without a fee.

The joint statement’s depiction of Ms. Giuffre as courageous contrasts sharply with the way Andrew’s lawyers described her in October, when they asked Judge Lewis A. Kaplan of Federal District Court to dismiss her lawsuit.

Andrew’s lawyers claimed at the time that the lawsuit was part of a [longstanding effort by Ms. Giuffre to profit from allegations](#) she had made against Mr. Epstein and others. They also claimed that Ms. Giuffre had sold articles and photographs to news outlets and reached secret deals to resolve abuse claims.

“Giuffre has initiated this baseless lawsuit against Prince Andrew to achieve another payday at his expense and at the expense of those closest to him,” Andrew’s lawyers wrote then. “Most people could only dream of obtaining the sums of money that Giuffre has secured for herself over the years.”

In the statement on Tuesday, Andrew said that he had never intended “to malign Ms. Giuffre’s character and he accepts that she has suffered both as an established victim of abuse and as a result of unfair public attacks.”

The settlement came relatively quickly — just six months after Ms. Giuffre filed her suit and one month after Judge Kaplan [denied Andrew’s motion](#) to dismiss it.

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HEADLINE	02/15 China urges Hong Kong to curb outbreak
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/15/world/covid-19-tests-cases-vaccine#chinas-leader-urges-hong-kong-to-curb-outbreak-as-soon-as-possible
GIST	<p>HONG KONG — China’s leader, Xi Jinping, has urged the Hong Kong government to “take all necessary measures” to curb the city’s worst-ever Covid-19 outbreak as soon as possible, according to a statement carried by state-run newspapers Wednesday.</p> <p>Mr. Xi was quoted in the Ta Kung Pao and Wen Wei Po, the city’s main pro-Beijing newspapers, as telling the Hong Kong government to mobilize all the personnel and resources possible “to ensure the life safety and health of Hong Kong citizens.”</p> <p>Carrie Lam, Hong Kong’s chief executive, acknowledged Tuesday that the epidemic had “outgrown our capacity,” as some overwhelmed hospitals in the city began moving patients to outdoor tents on sidewalks and driveways.</p> <p>Mrs. Lam downplayed the possibility of the sort of citywide lockdown used in mainland China, saying that health officials would continue to impose targeted lockdowns on buildings where positive cases had been found or sewer samples indicated the presence of the virus.</p>

	<p>For much of the past two years Hong Kong boasted of having the coronavirus largely under control through a program of social-distancing measures, aggressive contact tracing and one of the world's longest quarantines for arrivals from overseas. But after the Omicron variant slipped into the city late last year, health officials have found the virus increasingly difficult to contain.</p> <p>Hong Kong has recorded at least 11 Covid deaths over the past week, including those of a 3-year-old girl and a 100-year-old woman. Before last week, Hong Kong had not recorded a Covid death since September. Medical researchers have warned that by summer the latest wave could kill nearly 1,000 people — more than four times the number of people who have died of Covid in Hong Kong over the past two years.</p> <p>The surge in cases comes at a critical time for Hong Kong, which is scheduled to hold its election for chief executive next month. Mrs. Lam has yet to say whether she will run again, and Beijing has made no clear signal whether it wants her to stay on. The economy is slumping after years of travel restrictions, tight social distancing rules, and limits on restaurants and other businesses.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/15 Disney drops mask rule vaccinated guests
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/15/world/covid-19-tests-cases-vaccine#disney-world-masks-vaccines
GIST	<p>Walt Disney World, the entertainment resort located in Orlando, Fla., announced that it is dropping mask mandates for fully vaccinated guests, beginning Thursday.</p> <p>All guests will continue to wear face coverings on transportation inside the center, according to a statement on the resort's website, and those guests who are not fully vaccinated will still be required to wear masks in all indoor and outdoor areas of Disney World.</p> <p>Similar changes will be introduced at Disneyland in California, also on Thursday.</p> <p>Whether these changes will also apply to Disney World and Disneyland employees and whether staff members will be checking vaccination status of guests upon arrival is unclear at the moment. Disney World representatives did not respond to requests for comment on Tuesday.</p> <p>Universal Orlando Resort announced similar changes to its mask policy on Saturday. Face coverings are now optional for fully vaccinated guests, while guests who have not been vaccinated are encouraged to continue to wear a mask. However, Universal Studios does not require a proof of vaccination.</p> <p>The new mask policies at the amusement parks come amid sweeping changes to mask mandates across the country.</p> <p>In California, the state health authorities on Monday joined several other states in easing some pandemic restrictions but leaving school mask requirements in place. Florida's mask stance, however, has remained largely unchanged, with the authorities standing firm on their decision to not issue a statewide mandate.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/15 NKorea resumes uranium enrichment?
SOURCE	https://www.voanews.com/a/satellite-images-suggest-operations-resumed-at-north-korea-s-uranium-enrichment-plant-/6442083.html
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON — North Korea appears to have resumed uranium enrichment plant (UEP) operations at its Yongbyon facility used to make nuclear weapons, according to a former nuclear inspector after analyzing satellite imagery that revealed new activities.</p> <p>Ollie Heinonen, former deputy director-general for safeguards at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), told VOA's Korean Service that satellite images of North Korea's Yongbyon nuclear facility show that buildings comprising the UEP are in operation.</p>

Heinonen's assessment comes as North Korea has been reminding the world of its nuclear capability.

In January, Pyongyang tested 11 missiles, including an intermediate-range ballistic missile launched on January 30 capable of reaching the U.S. territory of Guam. A series of satellite images ending on January 16 suggested North Korea has not abandoned its Punggye-ri Nuclear Test Facility, sealed by an explosion witnessed by members of the foreign press in May 2018. Also in January, the regime announced it would consider repealing a self-imposed moratorium, raising a [possibility for a nuclear or intercontinental ballistic missile \(ICBM\) test](#).

Heinonen said snow melts on the roofs of several buildings making up the UEP indicate heat is being generated because the plant is in operation.

VOA's Korean Service emailed the North Korean mission at the United Nations for a comment on Heinonen findings but received no response.

"The most important signs are the snow melts in the section which contains the control room and stations for feeding and withdrawing uranium hexafluoride from the enrichment halls," Heinonen said on Sunday.

"These sections should only be heated when the facility operates," said Heinonen, who is now a distinguished fellow with the 38 North program at the Stimson Center.

Uranium hexafluoride is a chemical form of uranium used during the process of enriching uranium, a key ingredient for making nuclear weapons.

Nuclear weapons can be made either at a uranium enrichment plant or a facility that produces highly enriched uranium.

Heinonen said snow melts on the plutonium plant also indicate North Korea is continuing its operation there.

"In wintertime, melting of snow first on the roofs of certain sections of the reactor generating heat are the main indicators," of a plutonium plant in operation, Heinonen said.

Renewed activity

According to the latest IAEA report released in August 2021, North Korea has not started its UEP although its 5-megawatt plutonium producing reactor was in operation.

"Since early July 2021, there have been indications consistent with the operation of the 5MW(e) reactor," the report said.

"While regular vehicle movements were observed, there were indications, for a period of time, that the Yongbyon reported centrifuge enrichment facility was not in operation," the report continued.

The centrifuge enrichment facility is a part of UEP plant where rotating cylinders called centrifuges are located and used to enrich uranium.

Miniaturized warhead

David Albright, a former United Nations nuclear inspector and current president of the Institute of Science and International Security (ISIS), said, "If the [uranium] plant was going to be operational, [the North Koreans] have to keep the temperature of a centrifuge plant at about 70 degrees Fahrenheit year-round, so you need heat in the winter, cooling in the summer."

Albright said, however, it is uncertain whether North Korea is working to produce highly enriched uranium.

Instead, he said, North Korea could have begun the operation of the UEP to produce low enriched uranium that can be used in the light water reactor at Yongbyon capable of producing plutonium. Albright said the construction of the light water reactor at Yongbyon appears largely finished but not yet in operation.

“North Korea has a lot of highly enriched uranium for weapons, and does it actually need any more?” Albright said.

He suggested North Korea could be focusing on producing plutonium that could be used to make miniaturized nuclear weapons.

“Plutonium is easier to compress than weapons-grade uranium,” Albright said. “So plutonium is preferred [over uranium] to miniaturize as weapons.”

In response to Heinonen’s findings of the uranium and plutonium plants operating at North Korea’s Yongbyon nuclear complex, the South Korean Unification Ministry said on Monday the government is monitoring activities at Yongbyon closely.

Unification Ministry spokesperson Lee Jong-joo said, “With regard to North Korea’s nuclear and missile activities, including Yongbyon, [we] have been closely tracking and monitoring [them] on the basis of close South Korea-U.S. coordination.”

A U.S. State Department spokesperson responded to Heinonen’s findings by stating on Monday that “the DPRK constitutes a threat to international peace and security and the global nonproliferation regime.” The DPRK stands for North Korea’s official name, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea.

The spokesperson continued, “The United States has a vital interest in deterring the DPRK, defending against its provocations or uses of force, limiting the reach of its most dangerous weapons programs, and above all keeping the American people, our deployed forces, and our allies safe.”

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HEADLINE	02/15 Russia is courting Latin America
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/15/world/americas/russia-putin-latin-america-bolsonaro.html?action=click&module=Well&pgtype=Homepage&section=World%20News
GIST	<p>RIO DE JANEIRO — In the midst of his brinkmanship over neighboring Ukraine in recent weeks, President Vladimir V. Putin has also been busy trying to expand Russia’s influence thousands of miles away: in Latin America.</p> <p>He spoke to Daniel Ortega, Nicaragua’s strongman president, for the first time since 2014. He also called the leaders of Venezuela and Cuba. He hosted the president of Argentina, Alberto Fernández, who vowed during a Kremlin visit to reduce his country’s reliance on the United States.</p> <p>And on Wednesday — the same day that American officials have said could be the start of a Russian invasion — Mr. Putin is scheduled to meet with President Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil. Mr. Bolsonaro is flying to Moscow despite repeated entreaties from American officials in recent weeks that he postpone his trip as the West scrambles to pressure Mr. Putin over Ukraine.</p> <p>The flurry of personal diplomacy directed at Latin America by Mr. Putin during the most high-stakes period of his tenure often builds on ties that go back to the Cold War and sheds light on the global nature of his ambitions: to exert influence even on faraway regions. He is stepping up engagement and building ties to an expanding swath of the Western Hemisphere — including to countries, like Brazil and Argentina, that have traditionally been close to Washington.</p> <p>The intensified outreach has come as Mr. Putin has threatened to take unspecified “military-technical measures” if he does not get the Eastern European security guarantees he is demanding from the United States and NATO. Kremlin officials have dropped hints that such measures could involve military</p>

[deployments](#) in the Western Hemisphere, prompting analysts and the state-controlled media to indulge in feverish speculation that the moves could include audacious steps, not ruled out by Russian officials, like deploying nuclear missiles to friendly countries in Latin America.

As usual, Mr. Putin's true intentions are hard to read. His outreach to Latin America could be a feint, a way to complicate the West's response to his threatened invasion of Ukraine. At the same time, Latin American leaders have their own political agendas, and may be using Mr. Putin to gain leverage with the United States, which, along with China, still wields much greater influence in the region overall.

But the recent Latin American diplomacy is a reminder that to Mr. Putin, a broader goal is paramount in his foreign policy: to return Russia to the status of a great power capable of challenging the United States.

"Vladimir Putin views Latin America as still an important area for the United States," said Vladimir Rouvinski, a professor at Icesi University in Cali, Colombia, who studies Russia's relationship with Latin America. "So this is reciprocity for what is happening in Ukraine."

Mr. Putin's courtship of Latin America has been years in the making. He has been able to take advantage of ties dating to the Soviet era, local resentments against the United States and the whims of particular leaders. During the pandemic, as rich nations hoarded Covid-19 vaccines, the Kremlin grabbed another opening: In at least five Latin American countries — Argentina, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Bolivia and Paraguay — Russia's Sputnik V vaccine was the first to arrive.

"You were there," Mr. Fernández told Mr. Putin at the Kremlin last month, "when the rest of the world wasn't."

The Russian Foreign Ministry, in a written response to questions, said Latin America "was and remains for us a region of political goodwill, economic opportunity, cultural closeness and a similar mentality."

"Russia never participated in colonizing the region, in exploiting the peoples that populate it, or in any conflicts, wars or other uses of force," the ministry said.

Despite Russia's efforts, the U.S. and China have far larger economic ties to the region. In 2019, for example, South America exported \$5 billion to Russia, compared with \$66 billion to the United States and \$119 billion to China, according to data compiled by Harvard University.

China's influence, in particular, has grown thanks to its financing of tens of billions of dollars in infrastructure projects across Latin America, from [an elevated metro in Colombia](#) to a [space station in Argentina](#). That economic leverage has put its diplomatic might in the region arguably on par with the United States.

Russia's specialty in the region has been political support for countries that are becoming isolated on the global stage. Mr. Putin has been a diplomatic lifeline for the authoritarian leaders of Venezuela, Cuba and Nicaragua. And for Mr. Bolsonaro of Brazil, who has sharply criticized China and questioned President Biden's electoral victory, Mr. Putin extended an invitation when it appeared many other countries wouldn't.

During Mr. Trump's presidency, the United States and Brazil were as close as they had been in decades. But when President Biden arrived in the White House, he did not reach out to Mr. Bolsonaro, who had publicly questioned whether Mr. Biden won the 2020 election and was making his own efforts to undermine the upcoming Brazilian vote.

Eventually, Mr. Bolsonaro began asking U.S. officials for an invitation to Washington or at least a phone call from the new president, according to two senior U.S. officials who insisted on anonymity because they were not authorized to speak publicly. Mr. Bolsonaro warned that if he did not hear from President Biden, he would seek a summit with another world power, the officials said.

Mr. Putin at the time was making more intense overtures to Mr. Bolsonaro. The two presidents discussed a potential expansion of trade and agreements on science and security, the U.S. officials said.

Then, in December, with no phone call from Mr. Biden and increasing tensions in Eastern Europe, Mr. Bolsonaro accepted Mr. Putin's invitation to Moscow. The White House was not happy. Senior U.S. officials twice contacted Mr. Bolsonaro's administration to convey their concern that it was a bad time to travel to Moscow given the ongoing negotiations over Ukraine.

When asked recently about the lack of contact between Mr. Biden and Mr. Bolsonaro, Jen Psaki, the White House press secretary, pointed to conversations between Secretary of State Antony Blinken and his Brazilian counterpart in which he stressed "the need for a strong united response against further Russian aggression against Ukraine."

Mr. Bolsonaro told the Brazilian press that the Russian summit was important for his administration and that he would not bring up Ukraine. In a statement, his government said that given Brazil and Russia's relationship, continued dialogue "is more than just expected — it's necessary."

Still, Mr. Bolsonaro has faced intense criticism over the trip, including from some allies.

"I think it's wrong in many ways," said Ernesto Araújo, Mr. Bolsonaro's foreign minister until last year. "In other circumstances, it's ok. But with the looming crisis, it's not."

The most inflammatory step Mr. Putin could take would be providing military support or deploying weapons in the region. When asked in mid-January about the possibility that Russia could put military infrastructure in Venezuela or Cuba, a Russian deputy foreign minister said he would not rule anything out. Within days, Mr. Putin held calls with the leaders of Venezuela, Cuba and Nicaragua — conversations, the Kremlin said, that affirmed the countries' "strategic partnership" with Russia.

The State Department dismissed the talk of potential Russian deployments as "bluster."

"If we do see any movement in that direction, we will respond swiftly and decisively," the department's spokesman, Ned Price, told reporters.

Analysts in Latin America are skeptical that Mr. Putin would deploy weaponry to the region, in part because doing so could wreck much of the goodwill Russia has worked to create across Latin America.

Still, Russia has been instrumental in arming its closest allies in Latin America. Russia has sold weapons and tanks to Cuba and Nicaragua, and aircraft and antimissile systems to Venezuela. It also held bilateral military exercises with Venezuela.

U.S. officials believe Russia is aiding Venezuela's military, in addition to using the country for intelligence operations and money laundering, according to a senior U.S. official.

The U.S. is also concerned about Russian efforts to interfere in [Colombia's election in May](#), possibly to aid the leftist front-runner, who could be a more friendly negotiating partner for Mr. Putin than the current right-wing administration. U.S. officials have previously observed Russian online influence operations [trying to sow unrest](#) in South America.

But in the near term, analysts said, Russia's most important benefit from Latin America will likely be diplomatic support.

Earlier this month, Argentina's president, Mr. Fernández, visited Moscow and China on a tour partly intended to seek new benefactors. Argentina owes the International Monetary Fund more than \$40 billion and has been shut off from international capital markets. Ahead of his visit, Mr. Fernández granted an exclusive interview to the Spanish-language arm of RT, the Kremlin-funded television network, which now reaches about 20 million viewers in Latin America a week.

	“I’m determined that Argentina must stop being so dependent on the Fund and the United States,” Mr. Fernández told Mr. Putin. “That is where it seems to me Russia has a very important place.”
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HEADLINE	02/15 Pandemic-delayed medical care backlog
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/health/covid-put-thousands-of-procedures-in-wa-on-hold-frustrating-patients-and-worrying-surgeons/
GIST	<p>Scott Matsuda’s cancer was worsening.</p> <p>He was diagnosed with myelofibrosis — a rare type of leukemia — 15 years ago, and for the most part had been able to keep it from spreading too quickly.</p> <p>In late 2019, however, it became obvious he would soon need a bone marrow transplant, the 67-year-old said.</p> <p>“We geared up for it,” he said. He had a medical team at the Seattle Cancer Care Alliance. He found a donor. He and his family made arrangements to stay near the treatment center after the procedure.</p> <p>“Then, in the beginning of March [2020], everything got shut down,” he said, recalling when schools, businesses and other workplaces began closing in an attempt to limit spread of a new, mysterious virus.</p> <p>It was a disappointment, but he and his wife understood, said Matsuda, of Mountlake Terrace. They could be patient.</p> <p>He started coming down regularly with colds, and he tired easily, sometimes being knocked out for 12 hours at a time.</p> <p>“It wasn’t at a stage where it was dire, but it was getting there,” he said.</p> <p>Matsuda is among thousands of Washingtonians whose medical procedures have been pushed back during the pandemic, as hospitals cleared space for a crush of COVID-19 patients. Delayed procedures vary widely, from colonoscopies to cancer care — anything that, if postponed, is not anticipated to cause harm to a patient within 90 days, according to a recent emergency order from Gov. Jay Inslee that paused all elective care.</p> <p>Even now, exhausted health care workers are scrambling to catch up as patients with the omicron variant clog hospitals. Hospital leaders have said they expect it will take months, if not years, to work through the backlog of delayed procedures.</p> <p>Yet getting a clear picture of just how many procedures have been put off is difficult.</p> <p>Neither the state Department of Health nor the Washington State Hospital Association tracks the number of pandemic-delayed medical procedures, and several hospitals in the Puget Sound area said data wasn’t available.</p> <p>But UW Medicine provides a glimpse of the enormity of the problem. More than 18,000 of the health system’s surgical and procedural cases had been postponed during the pandemic as of December, according to spokesperson Susan Gregg. UW Medicine usually does about 60,000 operations during a typical year.</p> <p>Thousands more have been postponed at Providence’s hospitals, a spokesperson said in a statement, pointing in part to omicron’s rapid spread.</p>

“We understand this is stressful for our patients and their families who are waiting for important medical procedures,” said Cary Evans, vice president of communications and government affairs at Virginia Mason Franciscan Health. “... We are committed to resuming procedures as quickly as possible and in line with state guidance.”

Still, many patients are left with few solid answers.

“I feel like I’m treading water,” Clark County resident Beth Erickson said in December, four months after her initial hip-replacement surgery date. “There’s nothing I can do about it and there’s nobody that seems interested in trying to help.”

Her procedure was finally rescheduled for early February. It went well, she said. Still, it’s hard to forget the long months of waiting.

“I know hospitals are full,” Erickson added. “But damn it, then what about us?”

On hold, again

Gov. Jay Inslee first [put elective or nonurgent surgeries on temporary hold in March 2020](#), as hospitals filled up with the state’s initial wave of COVID patients.

The medical order was an effort to conserve both hospital space and personal protective equipment and at the time applied to all procedures not expected to “cause harm to the patient” if delayed for three months. It did not define “harm.”

The order expired in May 2020. Hospitals slowly returned to chipping away at their long list of elective surgeries. But some, on their own, paused elective surgeries during other COVID surges.

Then last month, all nonurgent health care services and procedures were again put on hold, per Inslee’s emergency order.

The proclamation, which remains in effect until Thursday, aims to help ease the burden on health care systems under strain from the massive number of hospitalizations brought on by the wave of omicron cases, [Inslee said in January](#). It’s a necessary step, Washington hospital leaders have said, but it hasn’t been easy for patients — or their surgical teams.

“We surgeons see our patients and see the needs that they have and recognize the impact of the pandemic and feel empathy for them,” said Dr. Doug Wood, chair of UW Medicine’s department of surgery. “We feel advocacy for our patients, but also somewhat helpless in our ability to care for them.”

Hospital teams recently faced another challenge during the height of the omicron surge as a growing number of their coworkers became either infected or exposed and were unable to work.

“This is taking a huge toll on health care workers,” Wood said. “People are burned out. People are hurting and tired and demoralized.”

At UW Medicine — and in many hospitals throughout the country — surgeons use an acuity scale to help define the urgency of each procedure, though various factors can affect decisions to expedite or delay surgeries, Wood said.

The first tier of the scale includes procedures that are “truly nonurgent,” like hernia or weight-control surgery, which are important, but could be scheduled at a later time, he said.

Heart bypass, plastic reconstruction post-cancer, most carpal tunnel and cataract surgeries all usually fall into the first tier, he said.

The second tier includes surgeries that could be postponed for a short period of time, but not indefinitely, Wood said.

“Things that need to get done, but don’t need to get done this week,” he added.

Some types of cancer surgeries, for example, could fit into the second tier if the cancer is not aggressive, he said. Kidney stone removal, aneurysm repairs, gallbladder surgery, ovarian cyst treatment and most joint replacements are usually categorized as second-tier procedures.

Urgent or emergent surgeries make up the third tier. Most operations for cancer, transplants, burns or trauma wounds and appendicitis would fit into the third tier, Wood said.

Then, within each tier, UW Medicine surgeons categorize operations into three groups: those that can be done as outpatient procedures, those that can be done as inpatient procedures, and those that might require intensive care or a longer inpatient hospital stay.

“In some cases, we had the operating room for the operation, but did not have a bed for that person to then recover in if it was one of the operations that required an inpatient bed,” he said.

Under Inslee’s proclamation, UW Medicine is only performing third-tier operations.

“As demoralizing as it is, there’s an understanding that Gov. Inslee is doing his best of trying to help us meet the competing challenges of health care when we have thousands and thousands of COVID-positive patients and enough of them needing hospitalization that requires refocusing our resources,” Wood said. “Unfortunately, that refocusing of resources means some people are harmed.”

Frustrated patients

In July 2020, doctors decided Matsuda’s condition was declining. After about three months of waiting anxiously, he finally received a bone marrow transplant for his leukemia.

The surgery went smoothly, though the recovery process will take time, he said. He still can’t do yard work, and he’s not supposed to fly yet.

While Matsuda said he’s grateful to his medical team, he knows others might not be as fortunate.

Dani Frank, 37, of West Seattle, has been waiting almost two years for an endoscopy. She had developed an ulcer years ago and started feeling symptoms again just before the coronavirus arrived in the United States.

Her UW Medicine doctor prescribed medication but she never got a call back about scheduling her procedure.

“I put two and two together as I was watching the news unfold,” she said.

Waiting has felt long. In the meantime, Frank’s made significant changes in her diet and lifestyle to keep her discomfort at bay, but said they mostly act as “Band-Aids” while she waits for the endoscopy. Staying away from certain foods — spicy flavors, tomatoes or anything with citrus or acids — and working with a nutrition coach helps, she said.

“I feel the burn of the acid almost every single day,” she said. “It’s not as bad some days as it is on others. But I really try very hard not to stay in the space of worrying what the long-term damage is doing to my body.”

“People are hurting, I know,” Wood said. “Health care teams are hurting. ... There’s a moral dilemma we also face of other patients that are not being cared for.”

	<p>But because there's not a clear solution, many more Washingtonians will continue to wait, he said.</p> <p>"It can be so isolating when you have a chronic condition or something you're living with every day," Frank said. "The biggest thing [I'd want to say] for other people going through this, is that I hope they know they're not alone."</p>
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HEADLINE	02/15 FAA to certify each Boeing 787 for delivery
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/business/boeing-aerospace/when-boeing-787-deliveries-resume-faa-will-certify-each-plane-itself/
GIST	<p>The Federal Aviation Administration informed Boeing Tuesday that when it finally approves resumption of deliveries of the 787 Dreamliner, the agency will perform final inspections on each newly built jet before issuing an airworthiness certificate that approves the plane to carry passengers.</p> <p>That power to issue individual airworthiness certificates is routinely delegated to the manufacturer. But the quality problems afflicting the 787 manufacturing process have prompted the decision to withhold that authority from Boeing.</p> <p>"This will allow the agency to confirm the effectiveness of measures Boeing has undertaken to improve the 787 manufacturing process," the FAA said in a statement.</p> <p>The federal safety agency added that it will retain the certificate issuance authority until it is confident that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Boeing's quality control and manufacturing processes consistently produce 787s that meet FAA design standards. • Boeing has a robust plan for the re-work that it must perform on a large volume of new 787s in storage. • Boeing's delivery processes are stable. <p>Responding to the FAA move, Boeing in a statement said "We respect the FAA's role as our regulator and we will continue to work transparently through their detailed and rigorous processes."</p> <p>"We will continue to engage with the FAA to ensure we meet their expectations and all applicable requirements," the statement added.</p> <p>The move by the FAA will slow 787 deliveries once they resume.</p> <p>The positive outlook from the news is that it may indicate the FAA is preparing soon to give approval for those deliveries to happen.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/15 Ottawa police chief resigns amid criticism
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/health/canadian-official-police-must-act-now-to-stop-truck-protest/
GIST	<p>OTTAWA, Ontario (AP) — Ottawa's police chief resigned Tuesday amid criticism of his department's inaction against the trucker protests that have paralyzed Canada's capital for over two weeks, a federal government official said.</p> <p>The bumper-to-bumper demonstration by hundreds of truck drivers against the country's COVID-19 restrictions — and the failure of Police Chief Peter Sloly to break the siege early on — have infuriated many Ottawa residents.</p> <p>The government official was not authorized to discuss the matter publicly and spoke on condition of anonymity.</p>

On Monday, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau invoked extraordinary emergency powers to try to end the occupation there and elsewhere around the country. Across Canada and beyond, the question in the coming days will be whether it will work.

Canadian Public Safety Minister Marco Mendicino said it is time for police to begin using their broad authority conferred under Canada's Emergencies Act, which allows the government to ban the blockades and begin towing away trucks.

"We need law enforcement to take the reins, to utilize the Emergencies Act and to enforce," he said late Monday after Trudeau announced he was invoking the law. "We have given new powers to police and we need them to do the job now."

Government leaders have not indicated when or where the crackdowns on the self-styled Freedom Convoy would begin. Mendicino said they were still working out the final details on where the prohibited zones will be.

The government will be able to ban blockades at border crossings, airports and in Ottawa; freeze truckers' personal and corporate bank accounts and suspend their licenses; and target crowd-funding sites that are being used to support the blockades.

It also can force tow trucks to move the big rigs out of intersections and neighborhoods. Up to now, some towing companies have been reluctant to cooperate because of their support for the truckers or fears of violence.

Since late January, protesters in trucks and other vehicles have jammed the streets of the capital and obstructed border crossings, decrying vaccine mandates for truckers and other COVID-19 precautions and condemning Trudeau's Liberal government.

Trudeau's decision came amid growing frustration with government inaction and a day after the Royal Canadian Mounted Police arrested 11 people at the blockaded border crossing at Coutts, Alberta, opposite Montana, and seized a cache of guns and ammunition.

"What the operation revealed is that you got a very small, hardened core driven by ideology," Mendicino said.

The public safety minister said the nation can no longer tolerate the disruptions and threats.

"We have been fortunate thus far there has not been mass violence," he said.

Ontario Premier Doug Ford, whose province includes Ottawa and Windsor, the site of a now-disbanded blockade at the Ambassador Bridge to Detroit, said: "Hopefully the police in the next few days, hopefully sooner, can move."

Ford said the siege in Ottawa is complicated by the presence of children in the protest. "They have kids there. We don't want anything to happen to kids. Bring your kids home," he said.

The busiest and most important border crossing, the Ambassador Bridge, was reopened on Sunday after police arrested dozens of demonstrators. The nearly week-long siege that had disrupted auto production in both countries.

Authorities also said traffic was moving again at the Pacific Highway border crossing south of Vancouver. The Mounties said officers ordered demonstrators out late Monday and several were arrested.

One of the protest organizers in the capital vowed on Monday not to back down in the face of pressure from the government. "There are no threats that will frighten us. We will hold the line," Tamara Lich said.

	<p>The protests have drawn support from right-wing extremists in Canada and have been cheered on in the U.S. by Fox News personalities and conservatives such as Donald Trump.</p> <p>Over the past weeks, authorities have hesitated to move against the protesters, citing in some cases a lack of manpower and fears of violence.</p> <p>The demonstrations have inspired similar convoys in France, New Zealand and the Netherlands. U.S. authorities have said that truck convoys may be in the works in the United States.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/15 Richland schools close immediately
SOURCE	https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/state/washington/article258441233.html
GIST	<p>RICHLAND, WA - Richland schools will be closed Wednesday after a decision by the school board to defy the state requirement that students wear masks inside buildings.</p> <p>District officials said they need to plan a path forward as state officials are already working on warning letters that could threaten their funding.</p> <p>“We ask for your patience as the district works to ensure our schools can continue to serve all students,” the district said in a message on its website late Tuesday.</p> <p>The emergency move followed a surprise vote by board members Semi Bird, Audra Byrd and Kari Williams to go “mask optional” during a special Tuesday workshop.</p> <p>The item was not on the meeting agenda, giving the public no chance to know it was going to be discussed. The meeting had been scheduled to talk about a resolution on the COVID vaccine process.</p> <p>The legality of the move was raised immediately by former longtime board president Rick Jansons.</p> <p>“I believe this is black and white illegal,” Jansons said according to a report on KEPR-TV.</p> <p>Bird made the motion at the beginning of the meeting to go to “mask choice” effective immediately.</p> <p>“I feel strongly about my vote,” he said according to KEPR TV. “... Our children should come first. That’s why these buildings are here.”</p> <p>Bird chose not to support the same motion during a previous meeting. He was not available Tuesday evening to comment on changing his vote.</p> <p>Richland is the third and largest district in the state to declare masks will be optional. Kittitas School District reversed course after a decision earlier in the school year to go optional.</p> <p>Then Kettle Falls in Stevens County voted on Monday to go mask optional.</p> <p>Board President Jill Oldson, who opposed the motion, told the Herald after the meeting it’s still largely unclear how the district will implement the board’s decision.</p> <p>While the district has declared that the masks are optional, the state law still requires the schools and administrators to enforce the requirement.</p> <p>That puts administrators at odds with the state Department of Labor and Industries, if they require teachers to be in the same classrooms as students without masks.</p> <p>Oldson said she understands the frustration of the community, but is afraid this will have unintended consequences.</p>

While a large number of the people speaking at school board meetings have been opposed to the mask requirement, Oldson said she feels the community is still divided on whether to continue following the COVID guidelines.

"I'm most frustrated that I can see the finish line," she said. "It just saddens me that we could see the finish line and we chose to disregard it."

STATE, UNION RESPONSE

Gov. Jay Inslee already has lifted the outdoors masking rules starting Feb. 18 because of declining new COVID cases, and he has a news conference scheduled Thursday.

"This action has no impact on the state's masking requirements. School boards are not empowered to supersede state law. It is null and void," Mike Faulk, Inslee's deputy communications director told the Herald.

"The idea that they would cancel a day of school and disrupt students' and families' lives for the sake of politics speaks even more poorly of the majority's actions," he said.

"Any debate about masks in this pandemic should be centered on science. The science tells us masks work. They are an easy way for people to keep each other safe," Faulk said. "Throughout the pandemic they have helped reduce infection in congregate settings where people have lower vaccination rates, including schools."

The Richland Education Association did not directly comment on the board's decision, but said they supported Dr. Shelley Redinger's choice to shut schools for the day.

"Dr. Redinger is in contact with OSPI's Superintendent, Chris Reykdal, and Chief of Staff, Tenille Jeffries-Simmons," said Ken Hays, the union president. "Dr. Redinger reminds all employees that we are required to follow state law, including the mask mandate. District leadership will be meeting to address the issue and determining the length of the school closing."

STATE SUPERINTENDENT RULES

When school districts defy the state rules, the state will send a 15-day notice for them change course.

The rules requires a resolution from the "local education agency" that "rescinds any actions" that violate the proclamation.

If they don't rescind the action, a second notice will be sent out with a five-day deadline to comply. If they don't meet that deadline, the state superintendent may withhold the agency's next monthly apportionment of revenue.

State officials have said they will send a notice to the school district.

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HEADLINE	02/15 Companies revert more normal operations
SOURCE	https://www.seattlepi.com/news/article/Companies-revert-to-more-normal-operations-as-16921221.php
GIST	<p>NEW YORK (AP) — For the first time in two years for many people, the American workplace is transforming into something that resembles pre-pandemic days.</p> <p>Tyson Foods said Tuesday it was ending mask requirements for its vaccinated workers in some facilities. Walmart and Amazon — the nation's No. 1 and 2 largest private employers respectively — will no longer require fully vaccinated workers to don masks in stores or warehouses unless required under local or state laws. Tech companies like Microsoft and Facebook that had allowed employees to work fully remote are now setting mandatory dates to return to the office after a series of fits and starts.</p>

“There has been a sharp decline in COVID-19 cases across the country over the past weeks,” Amazon told workers in a memo. “Along with increasing vaccination rates across the country, this is a positive sign we can return to the path to normal operations.”

Microsoft, based in Redmond, Washington, on Monday announced plans to open its West Coast buildings on Feb. 28 with a hybrid mix of working in the office and home. Facebook parent Meta Platforms, which had planned to bring workers back to the office on Jan. 31, will now require them to return — with proof of a booster shot — on March 28.

That's a stark reversal from just weeks ago when the omicron variant of COVID-19 was peaking, prompting companies to double-down on mask requirements and enforce daily health screenings while delaying return-to-office plans for remote workers.

The U.S. has since seen COVID-19 infections and hospitalizations plummet. Cases have plunged from 455,000 a day two weeks ago to 150,000 on Monday. COVID-19 hospitalizations have fallen 45% from the peak one month ago and are now at levels similar to when the country was coming out of the delta variant surge in September. And nearly 65% of Americans are fully vaccinated.

“I think we are in a much better place than we were six months ago, or a year ago,” said Jeff Levin-Scherz, an executive in the health practice of consulting firm Willis Towers Watson. “We are somewhat better protected than we were at any point in the past. But the new normal isn’t going to be the old normal. It will be somewhat different. “

Many office workers will still be required to wear masks in the office and get regularly tested. Front-line workers like store clerks and restaurant staff who were already physically going to work will have to adjust to maskless colleagues and customers — whether they like it or not.

Then there are the old realities of pre-pandemic routines for some: dealing with rush-hour commuter traffic, putting on dressier clothes again and working alongside co-workers for the first time in two years.

Megan Chichester, a 48-year-old graphic artist who works at a packaging company in De Soto, Kansas, received notice that she will have to return to the office in April. She has only stopped in the office a couple times since the pandemic began.

“I’m excited to see people in person because I have missed them,” she said. “But then on the other side, it’s also a little strange because I’m so used to not being around people that there’s a little bit of anxiety about it.”

Adding to the anxiety is the fact that she has seen return-to-office dates scuttled repeatedly over the past couple years when cases surged.

“It’s kind of like you’re getting whiplash because you don’t know what month you’re really returning,” she said.

Several states, including New York and New Jersey, have retreated from some of their own restrictions as their case counts decline but the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is not yet ready to tell everyone to take off their masks.

Many businesses — small and large — are figuring out what's best for them based on the attitudes of their customers and workers.

JPMorgan, which started requiring workers to return to the office in some form in early February, said that masking is now voluntary for employees who are fully vaccinated, except for those in cities or localities that still require it; unvaccinated workers will still need to wear a mask. Goldman Sachs and Morgan Stanley announced a similar policy in their U.S. offices.

Brian Anderson, marketing manager at a supplement store outside of Chicago, said they've been under a state mask mandate since last August. But as soon as Illinois lifts the mandate Feb. 28, they won't require customers to wear masks.

"Our customer base is more fitness-focused and definitely not mask wearers," he said. Store workers can wear a mask, but it won't be required.

By contrast, Jeff Moriarty, co-owner of Moriarty's Gem Art in Indiana, says they'll continue to ask customers to wear masks even though there hasn't been a mandate in his state since 2021. His business provides masks and hand sanitizers at the entrance.

"The reason behind this is because we do have older associates working in our store, and our owners are over the age of 65," he said. "We understand that some customers will choose not to wear masks, but we will continue to have it as a recommendation option."

Companies that have imposed their own vaccination requirements for staff also must navigate the changing dynamics surrounding the virus.

The Supreme Court last month knocked down a federal nationwide workplace mandate but companies are allowed to maintain their own requirements and many are keeping them in place. Others, like Starbucks, have decided to eliminate their mandate in the aftermath of the high court ruling.

Peter Naughton, a 46-year-old who works at the Walmart in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, said most workers are worried about the mask requirement going away. He plans to keep wearing his mask because it protects him and other people.

"It's not over. It's still here. It's going to be here for a while," Naughton said of the pandemic. "So we need to, you know, take precautions ... You never know if another variant is coming, which is very possible."

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HEADLINE	02/15 Seattle mayor: recovery, public safety
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/politics/seattle-mayor-bruce-harrell-emphasizes-covid-recovery-crime-in-first-state-of-the-city-address/
GIST	<p>Seattle Mayor Bruce Harrell delivered his first State of the City address Tuesday, promising sweeping changes to public safety, COVID-19 recovery and housing, among other priorities.</p> <p>In the speech, delivered remotely to the Seattle City Council, Harrell shared short-term plans — including a promise to bring city staff back to in-person work in mid-March — and long-term goals for his administration, such as ending the Department of Justice's oversight of the city's police under a decade-old consent decree through police reform.</p> <p>Harrell also shared a more detailed look at his priorities and how his administration would approach each issue to create the "one Seattle" introduced in his inauguration address six weeks ago.</p> <p>With rising crime, COVID-19 recovery and housing at the forefront, Harrell promised to address each issue by "going back to the basics" of city government and working collaboratively with the council he was addressing.</p> <p>"Our priorities do not have to contradict — instead of looking at differing opinions as mutually exclusive, we can look to the politics of and, A-N-D," Harrell said. "The right number of officers and the right kind of officers. More housing and vibrant, unique neighborhoods. Climate justice and new jobs. Diversity and commonality."</p>

Throughout the address, Harrell commended each council member for their various projects and committees, pointing out their shared priority areas with the administration.

Public safety

Consistent with his campaign promises and [efforts during his first six weeks](#), Harrell emphasized the importance of providing public safety justly.

Harrell committed Tuesday to hiring more officers to address staffing shortages [and response times](#) in the Seattle Police Department.

“The depleted staffing we see today does not allow us to react to emergencies and crime with response times that our residents deserve,” Harrell said. “It does not allow us to staff this specialty teams we need for issues like domestic violence or DUI or financial crimes.”

Existing funding for 125 additional officers and a Seattle-specific police academy class in June will result in “new officers we need to help us reach our public safety goals,” according to Harrell. But, he says he will only seek to hire “the right” officers.

“This will be the administration that ends the federal consent decree over the Seattle Police Department, the administration that guides the police to be more accountable, more innovative, focused and representative,” Harrell said of the 2012 federal decree, which found a pattern of excessive force and evidence of biased policing in the department.

Harrell also says he will not rely exclusively on police or arrests to address crime, and will continue to grow alternative response programs like Health One, work with defense attorneys and police on arrest alternatives and engage the community to ensure an equitable and fair approach to public safety, noting that a “militarized or a racialized approach will not be tolerated.”

“We can have safety and we can have reform,” Harrell said, later noting that he would work with [new City Attorney Ann Davison](#) to shape the city’s approach to the legal system.

“Together, we recognize the importance of ensuring we hold bad actors accountable and build a criminal legal system that looks comprehensively at delivering fairness and true justice for every person,” he said.

COVID-19 recovery

Another theme in Harrell’s speech was leading the city through COVID-19 recovery.

While Harrell noted that the city is “not yet out of the woods with the pandemic,” he said he’s taking a “steady decline in positive cases” as good news and setting his sights on recovery.

The first step, according to Harrell, is to have city workers who have been working remotely return to the office in mid-March.

While he notes the transition won’t be easy for some employees, Harrell said city workers will play an important “ambassador” role in helping businesses and others in need recover as the pandemic wanes.

“Our COVID recovery must focus on the most impacted and the most vulnerable, supporting small businesses, arts and nightlife, child care, youth, mental health support and emergency rental assistance,” he said. “We must get federal and state resources out in to the community as soon as we can.”

To help connect the community with resources, he announced the creation of CiviForm, a tool developed with Google.

“This tool is designed to reduce the time and effort needed for our residents to seek and apply for city affordability services,” Harrell said. “Back to the basics.”

Harrell also said the administration would work with the council on creating a job center to provide labor and employment resources in the city.

In addition to aiding businesses and residents, Harrell said the city must also focus on “issues” in its own upcoming 2023 budget, noting an anticipated \$150 million revenue gap, [despite an additional \\$31 million in revenue](#) over what was estimated to come from the first round of [JumpStart payroll taxes](#) collected by the city last year.

“We will need to look at all of our options, deciding between one time and ongoing commitments, adjusting expenditures, revisiting existing funding sources and looking at options for increasing revenues,” Harrell said, noting that the situation is not as dire as it was during his time on the council during the 2008 recession.

“This will be hard work and it must begin now, which is why I’ve asked departments to immediately begin looking at opportunities to save,” he added.

Addressing housing

Harrell also committed to addressing the city’s housing crisis with “urgency,” noting formation of a Unified Care Team to consolidate the city’s homelessness efforts, which have traditionally been split among different departments.

“The UCT will collect and provide streamlined data to the public, coordinate across departments with one voice, and assure our plan and progress are clear for all,” Harrell said, noting previous inconsistencies in priorities and data collection across departments.

Harrell also emphasized the importance of working with the state, county and newly formed Regional Homelessness Authority to find housing solutions, noting that several regional partners would make a “major announcement” about their efforts later this week.

“The Regional Homelessness Authority is now operational and estimates more than 40,000 people experiencing homelessness across this region are here,” Harrell said. “It’s time to finally implement real and overdue regional coordination with the urgency of true crisis response to this challenge.”

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HEADLINE	02/15 Seattle payroll tax big businesses: \$231M
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/politics/jumpstart-seattle-payroll-tax-on-big-businesses-raised-at-least-231-million-in-its-first-year/
GIST	<p>Seattle’s new tax on big businesses yielded more money than expected in its first year, raising \$231 million in 2021 to help the city address the COVID-19 pandemic and other issues.</p> <p>The City Council passed the “JumpStart Seattle” tax on high salaries at large corporations in mid-2020, after COVID-19 disrupted the economy and put many residents out of work.</p> <p>Under JumpStart, businesses with at least \$7 million in annual payroll are taxed on salaries paid to Seattle employees who make at least \$150,000 per year. The tax rates range from 0.7% to 2.4%, with the top rate aimed at super-high salaries at giant companies like Amazon.</p> <p>The tax took effect last year, and the projected revenue was built into the city’s 2021 budget.</p> <p>The city initially predicted that the tax would raise \$214 million, later revising that estimate to \$200 million. But the actual payments weren’t collected and tabulated until this month. The 2021 payments have amounted to \$231 million to date, Councilmember Teresa Mosqueda announced Monday.</p>

	<p>“JumpStart is a victory for everyone in Seattle,” because the tax kept the city “out of the red” last year and will fund affordable housing projects moving ahead, Mosqueda said in a statement.</p> <p>The city’s 2022 budget allocates \$234 million in projected proceeds from the tax to affordable housing and to other programs and services.</p> <p>Approximately 300 businesses have paid the tax for 2021, and the city expects to receive some additional returns in the coming weeks, said Melissa Mixon, a spokesperson for the Department of Finance and Administrative Services. Government entities and grocery stores are exempt.</p> <p>Mosqueda championed “JumpStart” in 2020, with Councilmember Kshama Sawant also pushing to tax big businesses like Amazon. They said the tax was needed to address economic disparities and argued Seattle’s large corporations could afford to pay. Councilmembers Debora Juarez and Alex Pedersen voted against the tax, arguing it could hurt the economy during a turbulent time and should instead be sent to the ballot.</p> <p>Then-Mayor Jenny Durkan also opposed the tax, which she warned could encourage businesses to shift jobs out of Seattle, prove vulnerable to the remote work trend and encounter legal trouble.</p> <p>The Seattle Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce sued to block the tax, but a King County judge dismissed the challenge last June. An appeal by the Chamber has been pending since July.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/15 Canada eases entry vaccinated travelers
SOURCE	https://www.king5.com/article/news/nation-world/canada-eases-travel-requirements-covid/507-a8e94a7e-8c02-4c84-9cb0-0aad1b5bd263
GIST	<p>OTTAWA, ON — Citing a decrease in omicron cases, Canada will ease its entry requirements for vaccinated travelers entering the country.</p> <p>Starting just after midnight on Feb. 28, fully vaccinated travelers will be able to enter with a negative rapid antigen test from the last 24 hours instead of a molecular PCR test. PCR tests will still be accepted.</p> <p>According to a release from Canada officials, rapid antigen tests taken before departure must be authorized by the country where it was purchased and "administered by a laboratory, healthcare entity or telehealth service" -- so at-home tests generally won't qualify.</p> <p>The antigen test must also be taken no more than 24 hours before a scheduled flight or arrival at the border. PCR tests will still need to be taken in the last 72 hours.</p> <p>The new measures include random post-arrival PCR testing for fully vaccinated travelers.</p> <p>Unvaccinated travelers will still be required to test on arrival, on Day 8 and quarantine for 14 days. Unvaccinated foreign nationals aren't allowed to enter Canada unless they meet one of the country's few exemptions.</p> <p>Officials said the changes are part of a "more sustainable approach to long-term management of COVID-19" after the omicron variant passed its peak in Canada.</p> <p>"The return to mandatory random testing of all vaccinated travellers will facilitate travel for Canadians all while helping our public health authorities to detect future changes in COVID-19 importation rates and variants of concern," Health Minister Jean-Yves Duclos said in the release. "As we have said all along, Canada’s border measures will remain flexible and adaptable, for potential future scenarios."</p>
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HEADLINE	02/15 People return to Tacoma homeless camp
SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/people-return-tacoma-encampment-days-after-it-was-cleared/Q43YJ5I4DZC5XABNBRXUP6QVIA/
GIST	<p>TACOMA, Wash. — People are back at the site of a homeless encampment in Tacoma that was cleared 10 days ago.</p> <p>The camp is under Interstate 705 in downtown Tacoma. City officials had it shut down due to public safety concerns following several fires there.</p> <p>Tacoma officials said during the shutdown, outreach workers made contact with 51 people. Eight were placed into shelters.</p> <p>Since then, about 30 people have returned to the spot to live. On Monday, outreach workers, including Saydey Spears, met with people at the camp.</p> <p>Spears said she was homeless four years ago.</p> <p>“Somebody walked alongside me because I didn’t just get clean, and I just didn’t get housed because that was a thing to do. I did that because somebody was like, ‘hey, here’s a different path,’” right? And I chose that,” said Spears.</p> <p>Choice is key, and some people turn down help when faced with giving up all they have.</p> <p>Theresa Power-Drutis is the co-executive director of New Connections. She said most shelters require people to give up their belongings. To someone who is homeless, that means giving up everything they have needed to survive.</p> <p>“When people say, ‘people are always turning away services,’ it just makes me a little bit crazy. Because if you were in that place, you might very well make that same choice of, ‘I’m not doing a short-term fix that loses everything I’ve got,’ said Power-Drutis.</p> <p>One of the people who was back at the encampment Monday is John Patchell. Patchell, who is in his 60s, said he has been homeless in Tacoma since he was 19.</p> <p>“When I was younger then, I could get around. Now, you know, this is the wrong place for me. I’ll tell you that,” said Patchell.</p> <p>Patchell said he wants help, but recent events have set him back.</p> <p>“I just went through a bad car wreck. My best friend was killed. I miss him,” he said. “I don’t know how to go about it. I’ve never been like this.”</p> <p>Also at the camp was Joshua Stecker. He said he’s getting help, but not enough to completely keep him off the streets.</p> <p>“They just push us from one area to another,” said Stecker.</p> <p>The city plans to put up temporary fencing this week. Officials said they are still assessing the future of the site.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/16 NATO: no sign Russia withdrawal Ukraine
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-europe-russia-united-states-vladimir-putin-534fb1c355ff5f135ba0261cb1448c3c

MOSCOW (AP) — Russia said Wednesday it was returning more troops and weapons to bases, but NATO declared it saw no sign of a drawdown as fears that Moscow [could invade Ukraine](#) soon persisted.

Russia has massed about 150,000 troops east, north and south of Ukraine, sparking Western concerns it was planning an attack. Moscow denies it has any such plans and this week said it was pulling back some forces and weapons, though it gave few details. Those claims have been met with skepticism from the U.S. and its allies — even as they seemed to lower the temperature following weeks of escalating East-West tensions.

On Wednesday, the Russian Defense Ministry released a video showing a trainload of armored vehicles moving across a bridge away from Crimea, the Black Sea peninsula that Russia annexed from Ukraine in 2014. A day earlier, the ministry reported the start of a pullback of troops following military exercises near Ukraine.

But NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg threw cold water on those statements, saying the military organization does not see any sign that Moscow is decreasing its troop levels around Ukraine.

“At the moment, we have not seen any withdrawal of Russian forces,” he said, before chairing a meeting of NATO defense ministers in Brussels.

“If they really start to withdraw forces, that’s something we will welcome but that remains to be seen.”

Countries in the alliance have also expressed doubt, as have leaders in Ukraine. Caught between Russia and the West, Ukrainian leaders have repeatedly sought to project calm but also strength during the crisis.

In a show of resolve, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy declared Wednesday — tipped by some officials as a possible start for an invasion — a “day of national unity.” To mark the day, demonstrators unfolded a 200-meter (656-foot) national flag at a sports arena in Kyiv.

“We are united by a desire to happily live in peace,” Zelenskyy said in a video address to the nation. “We can defend our home only if we stay united.”

The Russian military hasn’t given the number of troops or weapons being withdrawn and offered few other details. And while Russian President Vladimir Putin has signaled he wants a diplomatic path out of the crisis, he hasn’t committed to a full withdrawal.

Putin has emphasized that he did not want war and would rely on negotiations to achieve his key goal of keeping Ukraine from joining NATO.

While those comments seemed to change the tenor, Western leaders insisted that the crisis was far from over. President Joe Biden said Tuesday that American officials had not verified Russia’s claim, and British Defense Secretary Ben Wallace also said “it’s too soon to tell” whether the pullback is genuine, noting that the Russians “haven’t taken the foot of the gas.”

“I think what we haven’t seen is evidence of withdrawal that has been claimed by the Kremlin,” Wallace told Sky News. “In fact we’ve seen continued buildup of things like field hospitals and strategic weapons systems. Until we see a proper de-escalation, I think we should all be cautious about the direction of travel from the Kremlin.”

On Wednesday, Russian fighter jets flew training missions over Belarus that neighbors Ukraine to the north and paratroopers held shooting drills at firing ranges there as part of massive war games that the West feared could be used as cover for an invasion of Ukraine.

Belarusian Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei reaffirmed that all Russian troops and weapons will leave the country after the maneuvers wrap up Sunday.

Russia has denied having any invasion plans and has mocked Western warnings about an imminent invasion as “paranoia” and “madness.”

Asked by German daily Welt if Russia was going to attack Wednesday, Russia’s ambassador to the European Union Vladimir Chizhov quipped: “Wars in Europe rarely start on a Wednesday.”

“There won’t be an escalation next week either, on in the week after, or in the coming month,” he said.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov also pointed sarcastically at warnings of Wednesday’s invasion, saying that Russian officials had a good sleep on that night.

Russia wants the West to keep Ukraine and other former Soviet nations out of NATO, halt weapons deployments near Russian borders and roll back forces from Eastern Europe. The U.S. and its allies have roundly rejected those demands, but they offered to engage in talks with Russia on ways to bolster security in Europe.

Speaking after meeting with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, Putin said Tuesday that the West agreed to discuss a ban on missile deployment to Europe, restrictions on military drills and other confidence-building measures — issues that Moscow put on the table years ago. He added that Russia was willing to discuss those issues, but only in conjunction “with the main issues that are of primary importance for us.”

While Scholz reiterated that NATO’s eastward expansion “is not on the agenda — everyone knows that very well,” Putin retorted that Moscow will not be assuaged by such assurances.

“They are telling us it won’t happen tomorrow,” Putin said. “Well, when will it happen? The day after tomorrow? We want to solve this issue now as part of negotiation process through peaceful means.”

On Tuesday, a series of cyberattacks knocked out the websites of the Ukrainian army, the defense ministry and major banks, and Serhii Demediuk, the No. 2 official at Ukraine’s National Security and Defense Council, blamed it on Russia.

In Moscow, Russian lawmakers on Tuesday sent an appeal to Putin urging him to recognize rebel-held areas in eastern Ukraine as independent states — where Russia has supported rebels in a conflict that has killed over 14,000 since 2014. Putin signaled that he wasn’t inclined to back the motion, which would effectively shatter a 2015 peace deal that was a diplomatic coup for Moscow.

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HEADLINE	02/15 Covid cases tumble, 2,000 dying daily
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2022/02/15/health/covid-19-cases-dropping/index.html
GIST	<p>(CNN)While new Covid-19 cases and hospitalizations keep tumbling, more than 2,000 Americans are still dying every day from Covid-19.</p> <p>The US is now averaging 151,056 new Covid-19 cases, according to data from Johns Hopkins University.</p> <p>That's a 44% plunge from last week. New Covid-19 cases have plummeted to less than a fifth of the peak of more than 800,000 cases per day a month ago.</p> <p>And for the first time since Christmas, the US had less than 200,000 new Covid-19 cases a day on Friday.</p> <p>Covid-19 hospitalizations are also declining, with 82,842 patients currently hospitalized with Covid-19, according to data from the US Department of Health and Human Services. That's a 23% drop from last week.</p> <p>But more than 2,000 Americans are still dying every day from Covid-19, according to JHU. Over the past week, an average of 2,306 Americans succumbed to the disease every day.</p>

While most Americans -- 64% -- have been fully vaccinated, only 28% have received a booster dose, according to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

And the pace of new vaccinations and booster shots given have dropped to among the slowest they've ever been.

In December, the risk of testing positive for Covid-19 was five times higher for unvaccinated adults than it was for adults who were fully vaccinated and boosted, according to the CDC.

Over the past week, case rates were highest in Alaska, Kentucky, Mississippi and West Virginia -- with each state reporting more than 100 new cases for every 100,000 residents each day.

The rates of new cases were lowest in Maryland, New Jersey, Kansas and New York -- each reporting less than 25 new cases for every 100,000 residents each day.

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HEADLINE	02/16 President warns: prepare for hardships
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2022/02/16/politics/joe-biden-ukraine-russia-domestic/index.html
GIST	<p>(CNN)Many Americans are puzzled at being dragged into a 1970s-style Cold War showdown with Russia. On Tuesday, President Joe Biden tried to explain why the crisis matters.</p> <p>After building a strong Western coalition to try to deter Russia's possible invasion of Ukraine, Biden needed to prepare the home front for the hardships that may come for Americans, including soaring energy prices, if Russian President Vladimir Putin goes ahead. He did so in a grave White House address Tuesday that -- while it may have been necessary for domestic political reasons -- might also have risked a new escalation in US tensions with the Kremlin since Biden signaled no quarter on Putin's core demands.</p> <p>The world remains on tenterhooks for Putin's next move, even after Moscow said it pulled back some troops in a possible sign of flexibility. Biden said the US had not yet detected such a movement on the ground.</p> <p>The President's speech was directed at multiple audiences -- Putin himself, Russian citizens with whom he said the US had no quarrel, Ukrainians and US allies in Europe.</p> <p>But the President took pains to ensure the American people heard a clear message too. This was important for protecting his domestic flank. While Republican leaders have been generally supportive of the President's approach, there are clear signs that the GOP is laying the ground to pounce if the situation worsens.</p> <p>While stressing he would not send troops to Ukraine, Biden told Americans that everything that their country stood for -- freedom, democracy and the right of sovereign nations to decide their destinies - - would be risked by caving to Russia. He argued that American national security depended now, as it had done for decades past, on resolute defense in Europe to prevent any Russian moves on US allies beyond Ukraine.</p> <p>For much of the Cold War this was an accepted plank of bipartisan foreign policy. But given US exhaustion with two decades of 21st century war abroad and the America First unilateralism, attacks on NATO and hero worship of autocrats of the Donald Trump era, it can no longer be assumed this is a default US position.</p> <p>"(If) we do not stand for freedom, where it is at risk today, we'll surely pay a steeper price tomorrow. Thank you. I'll keep you informed," Biden said, before turning on his heel at the end of a crisp 11-minute speech to camera.</p>

Biden's fragile political position is a factor

There was a strong impression that Biden, whose staff had been seeking a window for such an address, according to CNN sources, hoped to rebuild a reputation for candor and competence dented by his last big foreign policy crisis -- the chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan last summer.

He also hedged against yet more incoming political damage when he warned that [a Russian invasion of Ukraine](#) could destabilize world energy markets and Americans will not escape consequences. This is why it was so important for Biden to explain to American voters that he did not welcome the confrontation and wanted to still offer Putin an off-ramp.

"I will not pretend this will be painless," the President said. "There could be impact on our energy prices. ... We're prepared to deploy all the tools and authority at our disposal to provide relief at the gas pump. And I'll work with Congress on additional measures to help protect consumers and address the impact of prices at the pump."

Perceptions of Biden's presidency and the rebounding economy as the pandemic eases have already been gutted by high gasoline prices and the largest hikes in inflation for basic goods in 40 years.

He can ill afford another economic blow only nine months before elections in which Republicans have high hopes of taking back the House of Representatives and the Senate, throttling his domestic presidency.

And the risks of a blowback from Russian action are acute, as Putin -- who has shown a flair for playing domestic US politics with his election meddling and would enjoy wounding Biden politically -- surely understands. For example, a new analysis by RSM shared with CNN found that if the current crisis drives oil to \$110 a barrel, inflation in the US would top 10% on a year-on-year basis.

Republicans play both sides of the crisis

That backdrop underscores why Biden's political position is treacherous as he navigates the crisis and why a speech like Tuesday's was necessary for political reasons, even if it risked complicating the diplomatic gambit.

While there is no sign that [Biden is willing to appease the Russians](#), he has little political room in Washington for any concessions.

Some Republicans are playing the game on both sides -- showing solidarity against Russia while leaving room to capitalize on the situation and brand the President weak if things go poorly. Others, especially those who swore fealty to Trump, care little for national unity at a time of crisis.

This duality in the GOP response was laid bare in a statement in which senior Republicans on the Senate Foreign Relations, Intelligence and Armed Services committees signed onto a statement with top Democrats on the crisis.

"In this dark hour, we are sending a bipartisan message of solidarity and resolve to the people of Ukraine, and an equally clear warning to Vladimir Putin and the Kremlin," said the message, bearing the names of Republican Sens. Jim Risch of Idaho, James Inhofe of Oklahoma, Marco Rubio of Florida and Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell.

But McConnell also told reporters that the crisis was partly Biden's fault.

"But for the catastrophe in Afghanistan, there's not a doubt in my mind -- not a doubt in my mind -- that the Russians wouldn't be on the border of Ukraine with 100,000 or more troops, had we not indicated to the rest of the world we were pulling the plug on Afghanistan and going home," McConnell told reporters.

New York Rep. Elise Stefanik, a Republican who rose to a leadership position in the House because of her staunch support for Trump, lashed out at Biden as she joined a push by GOP lawmakers for their version of punishing sanctions that would target Putin and his associates even before an invasion of Ukraine.

"Joe Biden's slow support for Ukraine and weakness on the world stage has emboldened Vladimir Putin's aggression against the sovereign and democratic state of Ukraine," Stefanik said in a statement.

A chilling moment

Beyond the political undercurrent, it was rather chilling to hear a US president make such stark assurances to allies about support in the face of Russian aggression. Biden almost cast a time-warp back to the 1980s, a decade when his worldview was sketched as a globetrotting US senator during the Cold War and his adversary, Putin, was forged into a strongman by his years in the KGB -- the Soviet Union's feared state security service and espionage agency.

"Make no mistake, the United States will defend every inch of NATO territory with the full force of American power," Biden warned.

"An attack against one NATO country is an attack against all of us and the United States commitment to Article Five is sacrosanct."

Article Five has only been invoked once -- by America's allies after the September 11 attacks in 2001. Biden's promise to defend NATO members, including those that joined after leaving the Warsaw Pact after the Soviet Union fell, was a reminder of how tense things could get if Putin invades Ukraine.

In that scenario, Russian forces would come closer to NATO troops in nations that border the country, like Hungary, Poland and Romania. That is a situation fraught with possibilities for miscalculations and would considerably worsen tensions in Europe.

Still, while Biden's frankness was jarring, the speech should also be seen in the context of a propaganda mind game the US has been playing with Putin as it seeks to set the pace in the crisis and remove his element of surprise.

Diplomatic repercussions for US security

Blowback against Americans would not just be at the gas pump if relations with Moscow deteriorate further in the event of a Ukraine invasion.

The kind of fearsome sanctions that the US and its allies would impose would cause a Russian counter reaction. Moscow has the capacity to disrupt foreign policy in multiple areas that Washington cares about, including on issues vital to US national security like curtailing Iranian and North Korean nuclear and missile threats. And Putin is likely to be even less responsive to US demands to [stop cyber-hacks on American soil](#) if his regime is pulverized by its sanctions.

All of this points to the real political consequences that Biden would face in the event of a Russian invasion of Ukraine. In his speech, he offered broad security talks with Moscow, consultations on transparency and strategic stability. But the fact that Biden cannot both preserve NATO and cede to Putin's core demands -- an alliance withdrawal from former Soviet allied states in eastern Europe -- shows that there may be no diplomatic solution to be had unless the Russian President is willing to settle for something less far reaching.

"The reality of the matter, what Putin wants, is something we cannot give him through diplomacy. He wants to control Ukraine, he wants to, in many ways, reset the European security order that was agreed to after the Cold War," Ivo Daalder, a former US ambassador to NATO, told CNN's Jake Tapper on Tuesday. "It seems to me he wants to threaten us into unilateral surrender and Biden went out today and said it's not going to happen," Daalder said.

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HEADLINE	02/15 Ukraine tensions push gas prices up
SOURCE	https://www.cbsnews.com/news/gas-prices-russia-ukraine-oil/

Fears of a possible [Russian attack on Ukraine](#) are adding to rising global oil prices, causing more pain at the pump for U.S. motorists.

Gasoline prices surged across the U.S. this week to their highest level in eight years amid rising concerns that a military conflict in Eastern Europe could drive up energy costs. The average price of a gallon of gas hit \$3.49 on Wednesday, according to [AAA](#), up four cents from the previous week and roughly a dollar from a year ago. It is the highest price since October 2014, according to the Energy Department.

California has the highest fuel costs among U.S. states, averaging \$4.71 for a gallon of regular gas. Prices approached \$4 in Oregon (\$3.96), Washington (\$3.96) and Nevada (\$3.90), according to AAA. Gas was cheapest in southern states including Mississippi (\$3.16), Oklahoma (\$3.17) and Kansas (\$3.18).

Gas prices typically dip in the first months of the year as Americans wait out cold weather indoors, but this year is different. Oil traders, anxious over the ongoing tensions between Russia and Ukraine, earlier Tuesday bid up the price of oil to more than \$96 a barrel, although it dipped in the afternoon to roughly \$93. Military action could push crude costs well above \$100, according to energy analysts.

"Recently we've seen crude oil prices move on the basis of geopolitics. A lot of what-if scenarios: What if Russia does invade Ukraine and we have sanctions?" Tom Kloza, global head of energy analysis for the Oil Price Information Service, told CBS MoneyWatch.

Russia produced more than one-tenth of the world's oil in [2020](#) — a significant share that would likely be disrupted in the event of military conflict or [threatened](#) sanctions by the U.S. and its allies.

"The U.S. is not a major importer of Russian oil, but certainly if the global market value of a barrel jumps, we're talking about a domino effect here that will eventually be felt at American gas pumps," CBS News transportation correspondent Errol Barnett reported.

Crude costs

About half the cost of gasoline comes from the price of crude oil, according to the Energy Information Administration. The rest is made up by the cost of refining, transportation and federal and state taxes. So anxiety in the oil markets translates directly to higher prices for motorists.

"Higher oil prices will eventually lead to higher prices at the pump," AAA spokesperson Andrew Gross said.

"When oil gets pricier, it's reflected at the pump right away, but when the price of oil drops it seems like it takes forever for the price of gasoline to follow through," he added.

Production and refining down

Oil-producing countries have been slowly ramping up their output, but global oil [production](#) is still below its pre-pandemic levels and lags consumption.

U.S. drivers are also affected by refinery closures, OPIS' Kloza said. Since last year, hurricanes along the Gulf Coast as well as Shell's decision to close a large refinery near [New Orleans](#) have reduced the nation's refining capacity by about 3%. "It's enough to make a difference," he said.

Next year, several large refineries are slated to open around the [world](#), but until that time, oil prices will likely keep rising, analysts say. Some Wall Street banks are expecting crude prices to hit \$120 a [barrel](#), which would break historical records.

"This year, if I had to bet on it, I would bet that we'll see the highest gasoline price average for the country that we've ever seen, but it's not going to represent the new normal," Kloza said. The record-high average price of gas in the U.S. is \$4.11 a gallon, set in July 2008.

What can government do?

	<p>Several Democratic senators have called for a suspension of the federal gas tax for the rest of the year, which would save motorists about 18.5 cents a gallon. States from Washington to Rhode Island have eyed similar moves with their local taxes.</p> <p>The Biden administration is also in talks with other nations to ramp up oil production or open up oil reserves, potentially repeating a November release of the oil emergency fund that temporarily blunted gasoline prices. Beyond that, the government's options are limited, said AAA's Gross.</p> <p>"There are not a lot of tools that any administration, either Republican or Democrat, can [use], just because so much of what we pay at the pump is wrapped up in the price of oil," he said. "That shows the pickle we're in, because we are so fossil-fuel dependent."</p>
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HEADLINE	02/15 Dutch govt. phases out virus restrictions
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/dutch-govt-phases-virus-restrictions-cases-drop-82907871
GIST	<p>THE HAGUE, Netherlands -- The Dutch government announced Tuesday that it will scrap virtually all its remaining coronavirus restrictions by the end of the month as infection rates begin to decline and pressure on health care services eases.</p> <p>"The country is opening up again," Health Minister Ernst Kuipers said.</p> <p>The Dutch are following neighboring Belgium and other European nations in easing restrictions as the continent increasingly looks for ways of co-existing with the virus without the economic and social damage wreaked by lockdown measures.</p> <p>Earlier Tuesday, the Dutch national public health institute said in its weekly update that new COVID-19 cases declined by 22% over the past seven days and ICU admissions fell 28%.</p> <p>"It looks like we are at or over the peak," Kuipers said.</p> <p>The government late last year imposed some of Europe's toughest lockdown measures amid fears that a surge in infections sparked by the omicron variant could overwhelm hospitals. But while cases shot up, intensive care unit admissions fell, allowing authorities to relax restrictions that had forced bars and restaurants to close over the lucrative Christmas holiday season.</p> <p>Hospitality and other public venues have been open for weeks with limited hours. Nightclubs have remained closed, sparking anger among owners and clubbers.</p> <p>Lockdowns and vaccination campaigns have caused anger and resentment among a small section of society and sparked regular protests, some of which have erupted into violence.</p> <p>Kuipers said the restrictions would be eased in three steps.</p> <p>With immediate effect, the government dropped its advice to always work from home and instead urged people to work from home half the time. It also scrapped its advice to restrict the number of visitors people allow into their homes to four per day.</p> <p>Beginning Friday, bars, restaurants, theaters, cinemas and other public venues will be allowed to stay open until 1 a.m. instead of the current order to close at 10 p.m. Visitors to such venues will no longer have to remain seated and wear a mask when they walk around.</p> <p>A week later, pre-pandemic opening hours will apply to all public venues and a COVID-19 heal pass will no longer be necessary to get access to venues. Social distancing and mask mandates will be dropped with the exception of mask wearing on public transport and at airports.</p>

	<p>Kuipers said the country's current pandemic situation means such measures are no longer necessary.</p> <p>“Corona cast a shadow over our lives. Corona made us lonely. Corona sometimes put deep divisions between us,” he said. “Fortunately, we are now in another phase.”</p> <p>The Netherlands has reported over 21,900 COVID-19 deaths in the pandemic.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/15 Sandy Hook families historic settlement
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/sandy-hook-families-settle-remington-marking-1st-time/story?id=82881639
GIST	<p>Remington Arms agreed Tuesday to settle liability claims from the families of five adults and four children killed in the massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School, according to a new court filing, marking the first time a gun manufacturer has been held accountable for a mass shooting in the U.S.</p> <p>Remington agreed to pay the families \$73 million.</p> <p>The settlement comes over seven years after the families sued the maker of the Bushmaster XM15-E2S semiautomatic rifle that was used in the 2012 mass shooting in Newtown, Connecticut.</p> <p>Nicole Hockley, whose son, Dylan, was killed in the shooting, said in a statement, "My beautiful butterfly, Dylan, is gone because Remington prioritized its profit over my son's safety. Marketing weapons of war directly to young people known to have a strong fascination with firearms is reckless and, as too many families know, deadly conduct. Using marketing to convey that a person is more powerful or more masculine by using a particular type or brand of firearm is deeply irresponsible."</p> <p>"My hope is that by facing and finally being penalized for the impact of their work, gun companies, along with the insurance and banking industries that enable them, will be forced to make their business practices safer than they have ever been," Hockley said.</p> <p>On Dec. 14, 2012, Adam Lanza, 20, forced his way into Sandy Hook Elementary School, and in the course of 264 seconds, fatally shot 20 first graders and six staff members.</p> <p>The rifle Lanza used was Remington's version of the AR-15 assault rifle, which is substantially similar to the standard issue M16 military service rifle used by the U.S. Army and other nations' armed forces, but fires only in semiautomatic mode.</p> <p>The families argued Remington negligently entrusted to civilian consumers an assault-style rifle that is suitable for use only by military and law enforcement personnel and violated the Connecticut Unfair Trade Practices Act through the sale or wrongful marketing of the rifle.</p> <p>Remington, which filed for bankruptcy protection in July 2020, had argued all of the plaintiffs' legal theories were barred under Connecticut law and by a federal statute -- the Protection of Lawful Commerce in Arms Act -- which, with limited exceptions, immunizes firearms manufacturers, distributors and dealers from civil liability for crimes committed by third parties using their weapons.</p> <p>Francine Wheeler, mother of 6-year-old victim Benjamin Wheeler, said at Tuesday's news conference, "Today is about how and why he died. Today is about what is right and what is wrong. Today is about the last five minutes of his life. Which were tragic, traumatic and the worst thing that can happen to a child."</p> <p>"Our legal system has given us some justice today but ... David [Ben's father] and I will never have true justice," she said. "True justice would be our 15-year-old healthy and standing next to us right now. But Ben will never be 15. He will be 6 forever."</p> <p>David Wheeler added, "We want to make sure that another father and another mother don't have to stand here someday."</p>

	<p>Lenny Pozner and Veronique De La Rosa, whose son, Noah, was killed at Sandy Hook, said in a statement, "Our loss is irreversible, and in that sense this outcome is neither redemptive nor restorative. One moment we had this dazzling, energetic 6-year-old little boy, and the next all we had left were echoes of the past, photographs of a lost boy who will never grow older, calendars marking a horrifying new anniversary, a lonely grave, and pieces of Noah's life stored in a backpack and boxes."</p> <p>"Every day is a realization that he should be there, and he is not. What is lost remains lost," they said. "However, the resolution does provide a measure of accountability in an industry that has thus far operated with impunity. For this, we are grateful."</p> <p>President Joe Biden called the Sandy Hook settlement "historic" in a statement and noted that "while this settlement does not erase the pain of that tragic day, it does begin the necessary work of holding gun manufacturers accountable."</p> <p>He praised "the perseverance of nine families who turned tragedy into purpose," who he said showed state and city consumer protection laws can hold gun manufacturers and dealers accountable even as they're shielded at the federal level.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/15 US: so far not seen Russia troops pullback
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/russian-troops-moved-firing-positions-ukraine-putin-ready/story?id=82909721
GIST	<p>While Russia's defense ministry said Tuesday that some forces would pull back from Ukraine's borders after completing military exercises, the U.S. has so far not seen that, President Joe Biden said in an address to the nation.</p> <p>But worrying U.S. officials, Russians troops are instead moving forward closer to the line, including with medical supplies, and being put into firing positions, sources told ABC News.</p> <p>The U.S. believes that Russia now has all the necessary pieces in place, including 150,000 troops in the region, to launch a swift and brutal invasion of Ukraine, the sources added -- the reason why Biden administration officials have now publicly been saying Russia could move "at any time."</p> <p>In particular, ABC News has learned that Russian leader Vladimir Putin had told his military forces to be ready to go by Wednesday, Feb. 16, but it is still unclear whether he has made a decision to attack his neighbor.</p> <p>The Russian government has denied any plans to invade Ukraine and repeatedly accused the U.S. of "hysteria" with these increasingly urgent warnings about one.</p> <p>"After Russian troops finish drills and return to barracks, the West will declare 'diplomatic victory' by having 'secured' Russian 'de-escalation' -- a predictable scenario and cheap domestic political points," Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Saturday, according to the country's foreign ministry.</p> <p>The U.S. believes an invasion would likely begin with electronic warfare and aerial bombardment against critical infrastructure, the sources said, followed by special operations forces entering Kyiv to decapitate the Ukrainian government and resupplying troops entering from Belarus -- with plans to complete their operations in 24 to 72 hours.</p> <p>During his remarks Tuesday, Biden confirmed that Russian troops "remain very much in a threatening position" -- warning that an invasion remains "distinctly possible" and would inflict an "enormous" human toll.</p>

But Biden said the U.S. would welcome Moscow pulling back its forces and engaging in diplomatic talks on U.S. and NATO proposals, on issues like arms control and transparency over military exercises.

While Lavrov said Moscow's response to those proposals would be transmitted in the coming days, Putin said that Russia's key demands were being ignored -- that Ukraine be barred from joining NATO and that the Western military alliance pull back its forces from Eastern European member states.

The U.S. and NATO have said those are nonstarters -- issues that only the alliance itself or individual countries can decide and not under Russian pressure.

"This is about more than just Russia and Ukraine. It's about standing for what we believe in, for the future that we want for our world, for liberty -- for liberty, the right of countless countries to choose their own destiny, and the right of people to determine their own futures, or the principle that a country can't change its neighbor's borders by force," Biden said at the White House.

Biden and Putin spoke Saturday -- their first conversation in over a month -- while their top diplomats Lavrov and Secretary of State Antony Blinken have spoken twice now in recent days. While the door to continued dialogue remains open, both sides have indicated, there are concerns Russia may resort to war even as it negotiates.

Russia already seized Ukrainian territory when it annexed Crimea in 2014, and since then, it has fomented a war against Ukrainian troops by arming and financing separatists in Ukraine's eastern provinces known as Donbas. Russian parliament passed a resolution Tuesday calling on Putin to recognize them as independent republics -- something Putin indicated he would not yet do.

But sources said if Russia attacks Ukraine, it would likely not be against a small slice of territory in Donbas, but a bloody, brutal, and swift campaign to topple President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's administration and install a puppet government.

Amid the heightened U.S. fears, the U.S. has also been concerned that the Zelenskyy's government hasn't responded quickly enough and isn't better prepared for a potential Russian invasion, sources said, including the positioning of its forces in eastern Ukraine.

U.S. officials have been urging better preparedness for two months now, the sources added, but President Zelenskyy and his inner circle have been both intent on staving off a panic and persistent in a belief that Moscow wouldn't invade.

While some U.S. officials doubt Putin is bluffing given the costs, financial and political, of the buildup, many analysts have been skeptical of dire U.S. assessments -- with some saying Putin is achieving his ultimate objective: destabilizing an increasingly democratic Ukraine aligned with the West.

"Putin has the hard experience of humiliation in Chechnya that tells him that while Russia might eventually be able to conquer Ukraine, they can't hold it, and with any crossing of the border they will pay a very high price in blood and treasure," said retired Col. Stephen Ganyard, a former senior State Department official and now an ABC News contributor. "If he fails in Ukraine, it could be his rule that ends as well."

In particular, Ganyard said, a Russian invasion is still facing warm, wet weather conditions that make tank movements and aerial bombardment difficult, while the number of massed Russian troops still pales compared to Ukraine's forces, especially if Russian troops have to occupy a country the size of Texas.

Biden made clear the U.S. still hopes for a diplomatic off-ramp and for Putin to decide against invasion, even as they continue to make preparations for one -- from increased military aid for Ukraine, to coordination with European allies and others on sanctions.

Since Russia's buildup began, allies and partners have come together quickly to prepare a year's worth of sanctions work in the last six weeks, sources said, including export controls that could devastate Russia's economy.

But the U.S. is concerned that Russia could maintain its troop buildup and other ways of pressuring Ukraine short of taking military action -- and that that could start to splinter the Western coalition's unity.

Biden made reference to the economic pain that could be felt at home in the U.S., including elevated energy prices because of Russia's major role as an oil and gas exporter.

"But the American people understand that defending democracy and liberty is never without cost," Biden said -- adding his administration was taking "active steps to alleviate the pressure on our own energy markets."

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Cyber Awareness

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HEADLINE	02/16 Lithuania warns banks of cyberattacks
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/exclusive-lithuania-warns-banks-cyber-attacks-power-cuts-amid-fears-war-ukraine-2022-02-16/
GIST	<p>Feb 16 (Reuters) - Lithuania's central bank has told the country's banks to prepare for power cuts and cyberattacks as Russia's standoff with Ukraine risks spilling over into a military conflict, according to a document and two sources familiar with the matter.</p> <p>Russia has amassed over 100,000 troops near Ukraine's borders, prompting fears of an invasion.</p> <p>Losing electricity and internet access are among "extreme but possible" scenarios that Lithuania's central bank told finance companies to be ready for in a letter sent to them last week and seen by Reuters.</p> <p>Lithuania, as well as Baltic neighbours Latvia and Estonia, shares a common power grid with Russia run from Moscow.</p> <p>"Increased geopolitical tension in the region leads to increased threats of cyber-attacks, including attacks on critical information infrastructure," the central bank warned in the letter.</p> <p>The letter did not name any possible hackers. The Lithuanian central bank did not respond to a request for comment.</p> <p>The warning comes as EU regulators more generally have told banks to prepare for potential Russian cyberattacks, and some financial firms conduct cyber war games to test their ability to withstand them.</p> <p>Lithuanian banks should have contingency plans in place for cyber assaults such as ransomware and DDoS attacks, in which hackers try to flood a network with high volumes of data traffic, the central bank said in the letter.</p> <p>It told financial firms to prepare for a breach similar to last year's massive SolarWinds cyberattack that was linked to a Russian-based agency and targeted hundreds of companies and organisations.</p> <p>'TO SPLIT THE WESTERN ALLIANCE'</p> <p>Russia has said some of its forces surrounding Ukraine are withdrawing, but NATO has urged Moscow to show proof, saying it has seen signs there are more troops on the way.</p>

	<p>Two Ukrainian banks, including its largest, were hit by a cyberattack on Tuesday, Ukraine's information security centre said in a statement that suggested it was pointing the finger at Russia.</p> <p>Once ruled from Moscow, but now members of both NATO and the European Union, the Baltic states have tense relations with their former overlord.</p> <p>Estonia blamed Russia for a cyberattack in 2007 that paralysed its internet network. The incident prompted NATO to review its readiness to defend against "cyber-warfare."</p> <p>Janis Sarts, director of a NATO-affiliated think-tank in Riga, said Russia could use cyberattacks and disruptions to energy supplies in the Baltics and across the West "to try to split the Western alliance and to try to create internal pressures for western governments."</p>
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HEADLINE	02/15 BlackCat starts leaking Swissport data
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/blackcat-alphv-claims-swissport-ransomware-attack-leaks-data/
GIST	<p>The BlackCat ransomware group, aka ALPHV, has claimed responsibility for the recent cyber attack on Swissport that caused flight delays and service disruptions.</p> <p>The €3 billion revenue firm, Swissport, has a presence across 310 airports in 50 countries and provides cargo handling, maintenance, cleaning, and lounge hospitality services.</p> <p>BlackCat has now been seen by BleepingComputer to leak a minuscule set of terabytes of data supposedly obtained from the recent ransomware attack.</p> <p>BlackCat starts leaking data</p> <p>As reported by BleepingComputer, the cargo and hospitality services giant had earlier disclosed a ransomware attack on its systems.</p> <p>Today, BlackCat (ALPHV) ransomware group has posted a small set of sample files that the group claims to have obtained from Swissport.</p> <p>The threat actor has announced they are willing to sell the entire 1.6 TB "data dump" to a prospective buyer:</p> <p>The data leak page seen by BleepingComputer today contains images of passports, internal business memos, and what appear to be details of job candidates, such as their:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Full name • Passport Number • Nationality • Religion (Muslim or Non-Muslim indicator) • Email • Phone number • Job role, interview scores, and other recruitment information <p>BleepingComputer has reached out to Swissport to better understand what this data represents, notably the flag indicator recording the religion of job candidates...</p> <p>With its 66,000 employees worldwide, Swissport handles 282 million passengers and 4.8 million tons of cargo every year, making it a vital link in the global aviation travel industry chain.</p> <p>As such, while the cyberattack on Swissport was "largely contained" with systems fully cleaned and restored, questions remain as to what happens to sensitive data that threat actors may have gotten their hands on.</p>

BlackCat emerged after BlackMatter's shut down

Dubbed the "[most sophisticated](#)" ransomware group of 2021, BlackCat ransomware group emerged after BlackMatter's [shut down by law enforcement](#).

This month, BlackCat members confirmed they are indeed [linked](#) to the BlackMatter/DarkSide operation.

While the ransomware gang calls themselves ALPHV, security researcher *MalwareHunterTeam* previously [named the ransomware BlackCat](#) after the group used the image of a black cat on every victim's Tor payment page. Since then, the ransomware operation has been known as BlackCat when discussed in the media or by security researchers.

BleepingComputer is aware of multiple victims targeted by this ransomware gang since November 2021 from numerous countries, including the USA, Australia, and India.

Ransom demands typically range between \$400,000 to \$3 million payable in Bitcoin or Monero. Victims paying in bitcoin incur an additional 15% fee on top of the demanded ransom.

As an additional extortion method, the BlackCat threat actors threaten to [DDoS](#) victims until they pay a ransom.

Overall, this is a highly sophisticated ransomware operation with the threat actors clearly considering all aspects of attacks.

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HEADLINE	02/15 Mysterious hackers target aviation, defense
SOURCE	https://www.zdnet.com/article/these-prolific-hackers-have-been-targeting-the-aerospace-and-defence-industries-with-trojan-malware-for-years/?web_view=true
GIST	<p>An unknown criminal hacking group is targeting organisations in the aviation, aerospace, defence, transportation and manufacturing industries with trojan malware, in attacks that researchers say have been going on for years.</p> <p>Dubbed TA2541 and detailed by cybersecurity researchers at Proofpoint, the persistent cyber-criminal operation has been active since 2017 and has compromised hundreds of organisations across North America, Europe, and the Middle East.</p> <p>Despite running for years, the attacks have barely evolved, broadly following the same targeting and themes in which attackers remotely control compromised machines, conduct reconnaissance on networks and steal sensitive data.</p> <p>"What's noteworthy about TA2541 is how little they've changed their approach to cybercrime over the past five years, repeatedly using the same themes, often related to aviation, aerospace, and transportation, to distribute remote access trojans," said Sherrod DeGrippe, vice president of threat research and Detection at Proofpoint.</p> <p>"This group is a persistent threat to targets throughout the transportation, logistics, and travel industries."</p> <p>Attacks begin with phishing emails designed to be relevant to individuals and businesses in the sectors being targeted. For example, one lure sent to targets in aviation and aerospace resembles requests for aircraft parts, while another is designed to look like an urgent request for air ambulance flight details. At one point, the attackers introduced COVID-19-themed lures, although these were soon dropped.</p> <p>While the lures aren't highly customised and follow regular templates, the sheer number of messages sent over the years – hundreds of thousands in total – and their implied urgency will be enough to fool victims into downloading malware. The messages are nearly always in English.</p>

	<p>TA2541 initially sent emails containing macro-laden Microsoft Word attachments that downloaded the Remote Access Trojan (RAT) payload, but the group has recently shifted to using Google Drive and Microsoft OneDrive URLs, which lead to an obfuscated Visual Basic Script (VBS) file.</p> <p>Interacting with these files – the names of which follow similar themes to the initial lures – will leverage PowerShell functions to download malware onto compromised Windows machines.</p> <p>The cyber criminals have distributed over a dozen different trojan malware payloads since the campaigns began, all of which are available to buy on dark web forums or can be downloaded from open-source repositories.</p> <p>Currently, the most commonly delivered malware in TA2541 campaigns is AsyncRAT, but other popular payloads include NetWire, WSH RAT and Parallax.</p> <p>No matter which malware is delivered, it's used to gain remote control of infected machines and steal data, although researchers note that they still don't know what the ultimate goal of the group is, or where they are operating from.</p> <p>The campaign is still active and it's been warned that the attackers will continue to distribute phishing emails and deliver malware to victims around the world.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/15 Internet Society data leak exposes members
SOURCE	https://portswigger.net/daily-swig/internet-society-data-leak-exposed-80-000-members-login-details
GIST	<p>UPDATED The Internet Society (ISOC), a non-profit dedicated to keeping the internet open and secure, has blamed the inadvertent exposure of its 80,000-plus members' personal data on a third-party vendor.</p> <p>The data, which was publicly accessible on an unprotected Microsoft Azure cloud repository, comprised millions of JSON files including, among other things, full names, email and mailing addresses, and login details.</p> <p>“Based on the size and nature of the exposed repository, we can assume that all of the members' login and adjacent information was open to the public internet for an undefined period of time,” said cybersecurity firm Clario in a blog post today (February 15).</p> <p>Helped by independent researcher Bob Diachenko, security researchers from Clario made the discovery and alerted the Internet Society on December 8, 2021. The repository was secured a week later, on December 15.</p> <p>Diachenko told <i>The Daily Swig</i> that the data was probably exposed for at least one month.</p> <p>Misconfiguration “We take data security seriously, and launched an investigation as soon as we learned of the issue,” ISOC told <i>The Daily Swig</i> this week. “In addition, third-party forensics experts were retained to assist.</p> <p>“We discovered our association management system was configured incorrectly by a vendor. This did result in member data being publicly accessible, but we have now resolved this issue.</p> <p>The non-profit added: “Fortunately, we have not seen any instances of malicious access to member data as a result, and we are continuing to monitor.”</p> <p>‘Making the internet stronger’ Clario said that if cybercriminals had accessed the data, it could have left victims more vulnerable to phishing attacks, identity theft, and fraud.</p>

	<p>“The breach suggests ISOC needs to do more to enhance their security infrastructure and adhere to the best practices they champion around making the internet stronger and more secure,” said the researchers.</p> <p>Founded in 1992, Virginia-based ISOC has chapters around the world and advocates for an internet that is resilient, open, and – with 37% of the world’s population having never used the internet – accessible to all.</p> <p>Clario advised potentially impacted members to change their online ISOC passwords, be on guard for suspicious-looking emails or links.</p> <p>This is the second incident Clario has disclosed this month in which a third-party vendor has been blamed for sensitive personal data being exposed within an unprotected Microsoft Azure blob repository.</p> <p>As reported by <i>The Daily Swig</i>, the previous data breach involved information belonging to students and held by the British Council, which provides English language courses worldwide.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/15 Microsoft Exchange Server flaws exploited
SOURCE	https://www.zdnet.com/article/squirrelwaffle-loader-leverages-microsoft-exchange-server-vulns-for-financial-fraud/?&web_view=true
GIST	<p>The combination of Squirrelwaffle, ProxyLogon, and ProxyShell against Microsoft Exchange Servers is being used to conduct financial fraud through email hijacking.</p> <p>On Tuesday, researchers from Sophos revealed a recent incident in which a Microsoft Exchange Server, which had not been patched to protect it against a set of critical vulnerabilities disclosed last year, was targeted to hijack email threads and spread malspam.</p> <p>Microsoft issued emergency patches on March 2, 2021, to resolve zero-day vulnerabilities exploitable to hijack servers. The advanced persistent threat (APT) group Hafnium was actively exploiting the bugs at this time, and other APTs quickly followed suit.</p> <p>While the ProxyLogon/ProxyShell vulnerabilities are now well-known, some servers are still unpatched and open to attacks.</p> <p>The recent case documented by Sophos combined the Microsoft Exchange Server flaws with Squirrelwaffle, a malware loader first documented last year in malicious spam campaigns. The loader is often distributed through malicious Microsoft Office documents or DocuSign content tacked on to phishing emails.</p> <p>If an intended victim enables macros in the weaponized documents, Squirrelwaffle then is often used to pull and execute CobaltStrike beacons via a VBS script.</p> <p>Sophos says that in the recent campaign, the loader was deployed once the Microsoft Exchange Server had been compromised. The server, belonging to an unnamed organization, was used to "mass distribute" Squirrelwaffle to internal and external email addresses by hijacking existing email threads between employees.</p> <p>Email hijacking can take many forms. Communication threads can be compromised through social engineering and impersonation -- such as by an attacker pretending to be an executive to fool accounting departments into signing off a fraudulent transaction -- or by sending email blasts containing links leading to malware payloads.</p> <p>In this case, the spam campaign was used to spread Squirrelwaffle, but in addition, attackers extracted an email thread and used the internal knowledge within to conduct financial fraud.</p>

Return to Top	<p>Customer data was taken, and a victim organization was selected. The attackers registered a domain with a name very close to the victim -- a technique known as typo-squatting -- and then created email accounts through this domain to reply to the email thread outside of the server.</p> <p>"To add further legitimacy to the conversation, the attackers copied additional email addresses to give the impression that they were requesting support from an internal department," Sophos explained. "In fact, the additional addresses were also created by the attacker under the typo-squatted domain."</p> <p>Over six days, the attackers tried to direct a legitimate financial transaction to a bank account they owned. The payment was on its way to being processed, and it was only due to a bank involved in the transaction realizing the transfer was likely fraudulent that the victim did not fall prey to the attack.</p> <p>"This is a good reminder that patching alone isn't always enough for protection," commented Matthew Everts, Sophos researcher. "In the case of vulnerable Exchange servers, for example, you also need to check the attackers haven't left behind a web shell to maintain access. And when it comes to sophisticated social engineering attacks such as those used in email thread hijacking, educating employees about what to look out for and how to report it is critical for detection."</p>
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HEADLINE	02/15 ShadowPad linked to China ministry, PLA
SOURCE	https://thehackernews.com/2022/02/researchers-link-shadowpad-malware.html?&web_view=true
GIST	<p>Cybersecurity researchers have detailed the inner workings of ShadowPad, a sophisticated and modular backdoor that has been adopted by a growing number of Chinese threat groups in recent years, while also linking it to the country's civilian and military intelligence agencies.</p> <p>"ShadowPad is decrypted in memory using a custom decryption algorithm," researchers from Secureworks said in a report shared with The Hacker News. "ShadowPad extracts information about the host, executes commands, interacts with the file system and registry, and deploys new modules to extend functionality."</p> <p>ShadowPad is a modular malware platform sharing noticeable overlaps with the PlugX malware and which has been put to use in high-profile attacks against NetSarang, CCleaner, and ASUS, causing the operators to shift tactics and update their defensive measures.</p> <p>While initial campaigns that delivered ShadowPad were attributed to a threat cluster tracked as Bronze Atlas aka Barium – Chinese nationals working for a networking security company named Chengdu 404 – it has since been used by multiple Chinese threat groups post 2019.</p> <p>In a detailed overview of the malware in August 2021, cybersecurity company SentinelOne dubbed ShadowPad a "masterpiece of privately sold malware in Chinese espionage." A subsequent analysis by PwC in December 2021 disclosed a bespoke packing mechanism – named ScatterBee – that's used to obfuscate malicious 32-bit and 64-bit payloads for ShadowPad binaries.</p> <p>The malware payloads are traditionally deployed to a host either encrypted within a DLL loader or embedded inside a separate file along with a DLL loader, which then decrypts and executes the embedded ShadowPad payload in memory using a custom decryption algorithm tailored to the malware version.</p> <p>These DLL loaders execute the malware after being sideloaded by a legitimate executable vulnerable to DLL search order hijacking, a technique that allows the execution of malware by hijacking the method used to look for required DLLs to load into a program.</p> <p>Select infection chains observed by Secureworks also involve a third file that contains the encrypted ShadowPad payload, which work by executing the legitimate binary (e.g., BDRinit.exe or Oview.exe) to sideload the DLL that, in turn, loads and decrypts the third file.</p>

Alternatively, the threat actor has placed the DLL file in the Windows System32 directory so as to be loaded by the Remote Desktop Configuration (SessionEnv) Service, ultimately leading to the deployment of Cobalt Strike on compromised systems.

In one ShadowPad incident, the intrusions paved the way for launching hands-on-keyboard attacks, which refer to attacks wherein human hackers manually log into an infected system to execute commands themselves rather than using automated scripts.

Additionally, Secureworks attributed distinct ShadowPad activity clusters, including [Bronze Geneva](#) (aka Hellsing), [Bronze Butler](#) (aka Tick), and [Bronze Huntley](#) (aka Tonto Team), to Chinese nation-state groups that operate in alignment with the People's Liberation Army Strategic Support Force ([PLASSF](#)).

"Evidence [...] suggests that ShadowPad has been deployed by [MSS](#)-affiliated threat groups, as well as PLA-affiliated threat groups that operate on behalf of the regional theater commands," the researchers said. "The malware was likely developed by threat actors affiliated with Bronze Atlas and then shared with MSS and PLA threat groups around 2019."

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HEADLINE	02/15 New tool recovers redacted, pixelated text
SOURCE	https://portswigger.net/daily-swig/new-tool-can-uncover-redacted-pixelated-text-to-reveal-sensitive-data?&web_view=true
GIST	<p>Researchers have demonstrated how a new tool can uncover redacted text from documents, potentially exposing sensitive information to nefarious actors.</p> <p>The tool, called Unredacter, was released by Bishop Fox today (February 15). To demonstrate that pixilation is “a no-good, bad, insecure, surefire way to get your sensitive data leaked”, it was designed to take redacted pixelized text and reverse it back into its reveal the supposedly hidden “clear text”.</p> <p>In a blog post, lead researcher Dan Petro, who wrote the tool, explained that it was created in order to complete a challenge set by Jumspec, and also due to the use of pixilation being a “pet peeve” of his.</p> <p>Insecure</p> <p>Bishop Fox has a “long-standing policy” to only redact information using black bars, which the company says is the only secure way technique.</p> <p>“Sometimes, people like to be clever and try some other redaction techniques like blurring, swirling, or pixilation,” lead researcher Dan Petro wrote. “But this is a mistake.”</p> <p>He told <i>The Daily Swig</i>: “It’s just not a secure way to redact information,” he explained. “But you see it all the time out there on the internet, often by journalists.</p> <p>“Clearly the community needed to be convinced that pixilation is bad, and a tool to un-redact is the best way to do it.”</p> <p>The tool</p> <p>Petro explained that assuming one already knows the font type for the original information and of the redacted text, “since the attacker in a realistic scenario would likely have received a full report”, his tool can be used to circumvent common issues when it comes to revealing redacted information.</p> <p>These issues include character bleed over, when a letter shares more than one pixilation column, variable widths between letters, and font inconsistency, which can all make using an algorithm difficult.</p> <p>Petro wrote: “...there’s an existing tool called Depix that tries to do exactly this through a really clever process of looking up what permutations of pixels could have resulted in certain pixelated blocks, given a De Bruijn sequence of the correct font.”</p>

“I like the theory of this tool a lot,” he said, but added that it “doesn’t work as well in practice as you’d like”.

The blog post contains more technical detail on how the Unredacter tool was built, as well as a proof of concept.

Warning

Petro said that the tool is aimed at being used by “possibly Red Teams”, but added that it “is mostly a proof-of-concept to drive home a point – never redact text with anything other than black bars fully covering the text”.

The researcher added: “Redacted data can be almost anything from passwords in a [pen test](#) report to victim names in a criminal report.

“The consequences to insecurely redacting information is highly context-dependent, but generally, someone redacts information because they don’t want it to be read.”

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HEADLINE	02/15 FBI: Americans lost \$1B to romance scams
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/feb/15/tinder-swindler-americans-romance-scam-con-fbi
GIST	<p>Americans lost more than \$1bn in 2021 alone to “romance scams” such as the one documented in the hit Netflix documentary The Tinder Swindler, according to the FBI.</p> <p>The majority of the victims who were cheated out of their money were women older than 40, and women who are widowed, divorced, elderly or disabled, the FBI’s Internet Crime Complaint Center (IC3) said in a press statement last week.</p> <p>Scammers often use poetry, flowers and other gifts to charm their victims, while keeping them concerned with stories of severe life circumstances, tragedies, death and injuries.</p> <p>“The criminals spend hours honing their skills, relying on well-rehearsed scripts that have been used repeatedly and successfully, and sometimes keep journals on their victims to better understand how to manipulate and exploit them,” the FBI said.</p> <p>“In some cases, victims may be recruited, unknowingly, to transfer illegally on behalf of others.”</p> <p>In 2020, there were approximately 24,000 complaints filed to IC3 that were categorized as romance scams, nearly 4,300 more than the previous year. The estimated losses in 2020 totaled approximately \$605m – though the real figure is likely to be higher, given many victims feel too embarrassed, ashamed or humiliated to report being taken advantage of.</p> <p>Perhaps the most notable recent example of romance scams is the Tinder Swindler, the moniker given to the Israeli-born Simon Leviev, who pretended to be the son of a billionaire diamond dealer and defrauded unsuspecting women on dating apps of an estimated \$10m.</p> <p>“Most often these scammers leave victims financially and emotionally devastated. Many victims may not have the ability to recover from the financial loss,” said Luis Quesada, special agent in charge of the FBI El Paso division.</p> <p>A study released last year by the cyber protection agency Malwarebytes revealed that people with less digital literacy are more prone to such scams. Those typically include ethnic minorities, women and older people, according to Malwarebytes.</p> <p>The FBI has offered tips on how to protect yourself online against potential abusers, including researching the person’s photo and profile to see if their images or details have been used elsewhere,</p>

	<p>being judicious about how much personal information you post – a “good scammer can turn a tiny bit of detail into a very effective punch”, the agency said – and never helping anyone move money, lest you become an unwitting money mule.</p> <p>“While we recognize that it may be embarrassing for victims to report this type of fraud, it’s important to do so, so that the FBI and our law enforcement partners can do everything in our power to ensure these online imposters are held accountable,” said Quesada.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/15 Centralia College hit in ransomware attack
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/centralia-college-hit-with-ransomware-attack
GIST	<p>CENTRALIA, Wash. - Centralia College has been hit with a ransomware attack on its servers that shut down the college's website and campus WiFi.</p> <p>The ransomware attack also prevented faculty and staff from receiving emails from outside senders. Students and staff can still access college phones, online classes, email and online accounts off-campus, according to The Chronicle.</p> <p>It's unclear if confidential student or employee data has been compromised.</p> <p>College officials say since moving to mostly online operations two years ago, the school is up to a strong start to recover from the attack.</p> <p>"While the attack is clearly challenging and disruptive, we're in a better place to combat it due to changes we implemented over the last two years," Centralia College President Bob Mohrbacher said in a written statement. "Much of our operations were moved online in 2020, so many college services and systems are able to continue in spite of this attack. We are doing everything we can to get through this as quickly and painlessly as possible, particularly for our current students."</p> <p>All online and in-person classes are continuing as scheduled.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/15 Global cyber threat report 2022
SOURCE	https://www.crowdstrike.com/blog/a-year-of-adaptability-and-perseverance-global-threat-report-2022/
GIST	<p>For security teams on the front lines and those of us in the business of stopping cyberattacks and breaches, 2021 provided no rest for the weary. In the face of massive disruption brought about by the COVID-driven social, economic and technological shifts of 2020, adversaries refined their tradecraft to become even more sophisticated and brazen. The result was a series of high-profile attacks that rocked many organizations and, on their own, represented watershed moments in cybersecurity.</p> <p>As organizations scrambled at the start of 2021 to protect supply chains and interconnected systems in the face of the incredibly sophisticated Sunburst attack, adversaries exploited zero-day vulnerabilities and architectural limitations in legacy systems like Microsoft to leave many reeling. At the same time, eCrime syndicates refined and amplified big game hunting (BGH) ransomware attacks that ripped across industries, sowing devastation and sounding the alarm on the frailty of our critical infrastructure.</p> <p>For security teams already dealing with an ongoing skills shortage, these issues proved challenging enough on their own. But the strain on security teams was amplified even more at the end of the year when the ubiquitous Log4Shell vulnerability threatened a complete security meltdown.</p> <p>Understanding these events gives visibility into the shifting dynamics of adversary tactics, which is critical for staying ahead of today's threats. This is the context that the CrowdStrike 2022 Global Threat Report delivers. Developed based on the firsthand observations of our elite CrowdStrike Intelligence and Falcon OverWatch™ teams, combined with insights drawn from the vast telemetry of the CrowdStrike Security</p>

Cloud, this year's report provides crucial insights into what security teams need to know about an increasingly ominous threat landscape.

Among the details you'll learn in this year's report:

- How state-sponsored adversaries **targeted IT and cloud service providers to exploit trusted relationships and supply chain partners**
- How state-sponsored adversaries **weaponized vulnerabilities to evade detection** and gain access to critical applications and infrastructure
- How sophisticated adversaries **exploited stolen credentials and identities** to amplify ransomware BGH attacks and infiltrate cloud environments
- How malicious actors **intensified attacks on critical cloud infrastructure** with new, sophisticated approaches

Our annual report also paints a picture that shows enterprise risk is coalescing around three critical areas: [endpoints](#) and cloud workloads, identity and data. Threat actors continue to exploit vulnerabilities across endpoints and cloud environments, and ramp up innovation on how they use identities and stolen credentials to bypass legacy defenses — all to reach their goal, which is your data. CrowdStrike has observed that **62% of attacks comprise non-malware, hands-on-keyboard activity**. As adversaries advance their tradecraft in this manner to bypass legacy security solutions, autonomous machine learning alone is not good enough to stop dedicated attackers.

CrowdStrike is relentless in our drive to keep you ahead of [adversaries](#) today — and into the future. To meet the adversaries head-on, we're unifying a modern approach to security with a platform that connects the machine both to the identity and the data to deliver full Zero Trust protection. As adversaries shift to targeting cloud workloads, we're providing deep visibility and proactive security across the entire cloud-native stack. To alleviate the burden of the constant cycle of patching, we're prioritizing the vulnerabilities that create the most risk. And for the most sophisticated attacks, we've delivered powerful new [extended detection and response \(XDR\) capabilities](#) to help overwhelmed security teams automate response and reduce the time it takes to hunt across domains.

The year 2021 has taught us that no matter how much adversity we face, the adversary will not rest. Attacks are growing more destructive, causing mass disruption in all aspects of our daily lives. But this is the challenge we've accepted and a fight that *we will win together*. I hope you find this report informative and that it gives you the same clarity of purpose it gives me: to be unrelenting in our drive to stop adversaries from stopping business, and our way of life.

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- Download the [CrowdStrike 2022 Global Threat Report](#).

HEADLINE	02/15 Sectors most likely to pay ransom
SOURCE	https://www.helpnetsecurity.com/2022/02/15/sectors-ransomware-attacks/
GIST	<p>CyberSaint announced the release of a report which identifies which sectors pay the most in ransom, have the propensity to pay and delves into the future of ransomware.</p> <p>Ransomware attacks have targeted and inflicted damage at all levels of the government and across varying industries. Local government, healthcare, energy, and financial services are just a few examples of the many sectors hit with ransomware attacks. Valuable industries like critical infrastructure organizations are targeted. Since these sectors provide vital services, organizations are more likely to pay the ransom to protect the stolen data and restore provided services.</p> <p>“Organizations across all industries are dealing with the ransomware epidemic, which is dramatically increasing their risk of exposure to operational downtime, inability to deliver patient care and deliver utilities, like gas,” said Padraic O'Reilly, Chief Product Officer of CyberSaint.</p> <p>“As the government calls for more attention to cyber risk and reporting on those risk postures, there is an urgent need for every company and entity to fully understand their cyber exposure and how to mitigate it from exploitation.”</p>

Sectors hit by ransomware attacks

- 44% of respondents in the education industry reported a ransomware event. 34% of respondents in the financial services sector and local government reported a ransomware attack.
- Across all industries, ransom payments in Q1 of 2019 averaged out to \$12,762, but in just two years, in Q1 of 2021, ransom demands grew to \$220,298.
- Specific industries tend to pay out the ransom more than others, like the energy, oil, and utility sector – 43% of respondents tend to pay the ransom. While energy and utilities led with their inclination to pay, other industries did not lag too far behind. Over a third of respondents in IT, retail, and business and professional services tended to pay out a ransom.
- Local government was the worst industry in terms of being able to recover from ransomware from backups.

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HEADLINE	02/15 China leader in vulnerability exploitation
SOURCE	https://www.computerweekly.com/news/252513372/China-emerges-as-leader-in-vulnerability-exploitation
GIST	<p>China-nexus threat actors are getting better and quicker at weaponising and deploying exploits for newly discovered common vulnerabilities and exposures (CVEs), and in the past 12 months leveraged new vulnerabilities at a “significantly elevated” rate when compared to 2020, according to CrowdStrike’s eighth annual <i>Global threat report</i>.</p> <p>CrowdStrike Intelligence said it had confirmed the exploitation of two vulnerabilities published in 2020 by China-nexus advanced persistent threat (APT) actors – in Oracle WebLogic and Zoho ManageEngine, respectively – but that last year it was able to confirm 12 vulnerabilities and nine different products being exploited, linked to 10 known APTs, including the infamous Wicked Panda (aka APT41 or Barium).</p> <p>The analysts said that although Chinese APTs have long developed and deployed their own exploits in the targeted intrusions, 2021 saw an increased volume of activity from Chinese APTs, highlighting an evolution in how these groups go about their work.</p> <p>“For years, Chinese actors relied on exploits that required user interaction, whether by opening malicious document or other files attached to emails or visiting websites hosting malicious code,” wrote the report’s authors.</p> <p>“In contrast, exploits deployed by these actors in 2021 focused heavily on vulnerabilities in internet-facing devices or services.”</p> <p>Among the vulnerabilities favoured by Chinese APTs in 2021 were the Microsoft Exchange bugs collectively known as ProxyLogon and ProxyShell, and other networking products such as VPNs and routers. They are also increasingly looking to enterprise software products hosted on internet-facing servers.</p> <p>CrowdStrike’s team assessed that these exploits are largely being independently developed in-house or, in a new twist, acquired from legitimate sources in China.</p> <p>“In particular,” the team wrote, “the Tianfu Cup hacking competition demonstrates the significant exploitation development talent within China’s hacking community.</p> <p>“Exploits submitted at the Tianfu Cup have later been acquired by Chinese targeted intrusion actors for use in their operations. In several 2021 incidents, Chinese actors demonstrated an ability to rapidly operationalise public proof-of-concept exploit code.”</p> <p>The latest edition of the report highlights the ongoing adaptation of state-linked targeted intrusion adversaries to new opportunities and strategic requirements, and not just among those linked to China. The other Big Four nation state adversaries – Russia, Iran and North Korea – also employed new forms of tradecraft in 2021, such as targeting IT and cloud services providers in Russia’s case, while the Iranians</p>

	<p>now favour masking their intrusions behind ransomware attacks, and the North Koreans have shifted their focus to crypto-linked targets to maintain their cashflow.</p> <p>Beyond the Big Four, and other governments with established cyber capabilities, CrowdStrike debuted two new “adversary animals” on its threat matrix in 2021 – Wolf for Turkey and Ocelot for Colombia, joining the likes of Bear (Russia), Panda (China) and Kitten (Iran). This underscores an increase in offensive capabilities beyond governments traditionally linked to cyber ops, and highlights the growing variety of national goals.</p> <p>CrowdStrike also noted the contribution of what it terms private sector offensive actors or “hackers for hire” – Israeli malware developers NSO Group and Candiru fall into this category – and the continued development and proliferation of grassroots hacktivist groups – such groups are assigned the moniker Jackal in its animal-themed matrix – particularly in Belarus and Iran.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/16 Bitcoin price hovers around \$44,000
SOURCE	https://www.foxbusiness.com/markets/bitcoin-price-2-16-2022
GIST	<p>Bitcoin traded around \$44,000 on Wednesday morning, the day after the cryptocurrency recorded a gain.</p> <p>Heading into Wednesday, bitcoin was up in two of the past three days.</p> <p>The cryptocurrency is up 14% month-to-date, but down 5% year-to-date.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/15 Cyberattacks hit Ukraine army, major banks
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/cyberattack-hits-ukrainian-government-sites-major-banks-82906221
GIST	<p>KYIV, Ukraine -- A series of cyberattacks on Tuesday knocked the websites of the Ukrainian army, the defense ministry and major banks offline, Ukrainian authorities said, as tensions persisted over the threat of a possible Russian invasion.</p> <p>Still, there was no indication the relatively low-level, distributed-denial-of-service attacks might be a smokescreen for more serious and damaging cyber mischief.</p> <p>At least 10 Ukrainian websites were unreachable due to the attacks, including the defense, foreign and culture ministries and Ukraine’s two largest state banks. In such attacks, websites are barraged with a flood of junk data packets, rendering them unreachable.</p> <p>“We don’t have any information of other disruptive actions that (could) be hidden by this DDoS attack,” said Victor Zhora, a top Ukrainian cyberdefense official. He said emergency response teams were working to cut off the attackers and recover services.</p> <p>Customers at Ukraine’s largest state-owned bank, Privatbank, and the state-owned Sberbank reported problems with online payments and the banks’ apps.</p> <p>Among the attackers' targets was the hosting provider for Ukraine’s army and Privatbank, said Doug Madory, director of internet analysis at the network management firm Kentik Inc.</p> <p>“There is no threat to depositors’ funds,” Zhora's agency, the Ukrainian Information Ministry’s Center for Strategic Communications and Information Security, said in a statement. Nor did the attack affect the communications of Ukraine's military forces, said Zhora.</p> <p>It was too early to say who was behind the attack, he added.</p>

The ministry statement suggested Russian involvement: “It is possible that the aggressor resorted to tactics of petty mischief, because his aggressive plans aren’t working overall,” the Ukrainian statement said.

Quick attribution in cyberattacks is typically difficult, as aggressors often try to hide their tracks.

“We need to analyze logs from IT providers,” Zhora said

Oleh Derevianko, a leading private-sector expert and founder of the ISSP cybersecurity firm, said Ukrainians are always worried that such “noisy” cyberattacks could be masking something more sinister.

Escalating fears about a Russian invasion of Ukraine eased slightly as Russia sent signals Tuesday that it might be pulling back from the brink, but Western powers demanded proof.

The cyber aggression is nevertheless typical of Russian President Vladimir Putin, who likes to try to keep his adversaries off balance.

“These attacks are ratcheting up attention and pressure,” said Christian Sorensen, the CEO of the cybersecurity firm SightGain who previously worked for U.S. Cyber Command. “The purpose at this stage is to increase leverage in negotiations.”

Ukraine has been subject to a steady diet of Russian aggression in cyberspace since 2014, when Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula and backed separatists in eastern Ukraine.

On Jan. 14, a cyberattack that damaged servers at Ukraine's State Emergency Service and at the Motor Transport Insurance Bureau with a malicious “wiper” cloaked as ransomware. The damage proved minimal — some cybersecurity experts think that was by design, given the capabilities of Russian state-backed hackers. A message posted simultaneously on dozens of defaced Ukrainian government websites said: “Be afraid and expect the worst.”

Serhii Demediuk, the No. 2 official at Ukraine’s National Security and Defense Council, called the Jan. 14 attack “part of a full-scale Russian operation directed at destabilizing the situation in Ukraine, aimed at exploding our Euro-Atlantic integration and seizing power.”

Such attacks are apt to continue as Putin tries to “degrade” and “delegitimize” trust in Ukrainian institutions, the cybersecurity firm CrowdStrike said in a subsequent blog post.

In the winters of 2015 and 2016, attacks on Ukraine's power grid attributed to Russia's GRU military intelligence agency temporarily knocked out power.

Russia's GRU has also been blamed for perhaps the most devastating cyberattack ever. Targeting companies doing business in Ukraine in 2017, the NotPetya virus caused over \$10 billion in damage worldwide. The virus, also disguised as ransomware, was a “wiper” virus that scrubbed entire networks.

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Terror Conditions

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HEADLINE	02/14 Under Taliban, Afghans safer but poorer
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/months-taliban-afghans-safer-poorer-hopeful-82895145
GIST	<p>KABUL, Afghanistan -- Afghanistan has undergone a dramatic transformation in half a year of Taliban rule.</p> <p>The country feels safer, less violent than it has in decades, but the once aid-fueled economy is barreling toward collapse. Tens of thousands of Afghans have fled or have been evacuated, including large numbers of the educated elites. They either fear for their economic future or lack of freedom under a group that</p>

ascribes to a strict interpretation of Islam and during its previous rule in the late 1990s barred girls from school and women from work.

Tuesday marks six months since the Afghan capital of Kabul was ceded to the Taliban with the sudden and secret departure of the country's U.S.-backed president. The takeover of Kabul had been preceded by a months-long Taliban military campaign to take control of provincial areas, many of which fell with hardly a fight.

Today, the sight of armed Taliban fighters roaming the street still jars and frightens residents. But women have returned to the streets, and many young men have put on Western clothes again after initially shedding them for the traditional shalwar kameez, the long shirt and baggy pants favored by the Taliban.

Unlike in the 1990s, the Taliban are allowing some women to work. Women are back in their jobs in the health and education ministries, as well as at Kabul International airport, often next to men. But women are still waiting to return to work in other ministries. Thousands of jobs have been lost in the economic downward spiral, and women have been hit hardest.

The Taliban have cracked down on women's protests and harassed journalists, including briefly detaining two foreign journalists working with the U.N. refugee agency last week.

On Monday, the detention of some young men selling heart-shaped flowers in recognition of Valentine's Day was a stark reminder that the new all-male religion-driven administration has no tolerance for Western ideas of romance.

Girls in grades 1-6 have been going to school, but those in the higher grades are still locked out in most parts of the country. The Taliban promised all girls will be in school after the Afghan new year at the end of March. Universities are gradually reopening and private universities and schools never closed.

Poverty is deepening. Even those who have money have a hard time accessing it. At banks, lines are long as residents wait for hours, sometimes even days, to withdraw a limit of \$200 a week.

More than \$9 billion in Afghanistan's foreign assets were frozen after the Taliban takeover. Last week, President Joe Biden signed an executive order that promised \$3.5 billion — out of \$7 billion of Afghanistan's assets frozen in the United States — would be given to families of America's 9/11 victims. The other \$3.5 billion would be freed for Afghan aid.

Afghans across the political spectrum have decried the order, accusing the U.S. of taking money that belongs to Afghans.

The Taliban have campaigned for international recognition of their all-male, all-Taliban government, but they are being pressed to create an inclusive administration and guarantee the rights of women and religious minorities.

Graeme Smith, a senior consultant for the International Crisis Group's Asia Program, warned against using sanctions, saying that would backfire.

"Keeping economic pressure on the Taliban will not get rid of their regime, but a collapsing economy could lead to more people fleeing the country, sparking another migration crisis" he said. He also noted that this round of Taliban rule "probably ranks as the most peaceful six-month period that Afghanistan has enjoyed in four decades."

The Taliban have re-opened the country's passport office, which is clogged with thousands of people a day. The Taliban have promised Afghans they can travel but only with proper documents. Those trying to leave seem largely driven by fear of a failing economy or the desire for greater freedom in a more liberal society.

	<p>Several officials linked to the former U.S.-backed government have returned. One of the returnees, former ambassador Omar Zakhilwal, said he encountered no rancor from the Taliban.</p> <p>He said he hoped that the Taliban will “find the courage” to open their ranks, guarantee minorities a say in the government and go further to guarantee rights of all Afghans.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/16 Somalia: al-Shabab attack near capital
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/africa-elections-kenya-national-elections-somalia-76271e3e202a6f84b39266c09dfabce0
GIST	<p>NAIROBI, Kenya (AP) — An attack by the al-Shabab extremist group on Wednesday killed five people and wounded 16 on the outskirts of Somalia’s capital, police said.</p> <p>Somalia’s government said the early morning attack targeted police and checkpoints outside of Mogadishu.</p> <p>The al-Qaida-linked al-Shabab often targets Mogadishu, and the United Nations and other international observers have warned that the group would take advantage of Somalia’s current election crisis to launch more attacks.</p> <p>National elections have been delayed for more than a year.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/14 UK: Nazi pipe-bomb fanatic to be freed
SOURCE	https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-south-yorkshire-60379224
GIST	<p>A Nazi terrorist is to be freed from a young offenders' institution despite a parole board saying it was not satisfied he was suitable for release.</p> <p>Jack Coulson, 22, from Mexborough, was detained in 2018 after admitting downloading a terrorist manual.</p> <p>A parole board previously refused his early release as it did not believe there was a "reduction in risk" since he was first detained.</p> <p>But due to the type of sentence he is serving, he will be freed in October.</p> <p>In July 2018, Coulson was handed a four year and eight month sentence for having a terror handbook, after previously being convicted of making an explosive.</p> <p>Leeds Crown Court heard how the then 19-year-old downloaded the book, which described how to make and detonate explosives, after boasting about wanting to kill a female MP.</p> <p>During a police interview Coulson had described Adolf Hitler as his "leader", Leeds Crown Court heard.</p> <p>Now 22, Coulson first became eligible to be considered for release in April last year.</p> <p>A document detailing the Parole Board's decision showed work to address his offending while in custody was considered to have been of "limited benefit".</p> <p>It said an "intervention" to tackle the causes of his extremist behaviour was "not completed due to concerns about Mr Coulson's engagement".</p> <p>None of the officials or experts who gave evidence to the Parole Board supported his release.</p>

	<p>A plan to restrict Coulson's movements and who he contacted if he was released was not "robust enough" at this stage as he would "be unlikely to comply with it", the board said.</p> <p>The panel added it "was not satisfied that Mr Coulson was suitable for release".</p> <p>Although this request for an early end to his detention was rejected, because he is serving a determinate sentence, he is still due to be freed when his term ends in October this year.</p>
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Suspicious, Unusual

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HEADLINE	02/14 Study: West megadrought driest in 1,200yrs
SOURCE	https://www.seattlepi.com/news/article/West-megadrought-hits-worst-case-scenario-driest-16917699.php
GIST	<p>The American West's megadrought deepened so much last year that it is now the driest in at least 1,200 years and is a worst-case climate change scenario playing out live, a new study finds.</p> <p>A dramatic drying in 2021 — about as dry as 2002 and one of the driest years ever recorded for the region — pushed the 22-year drought past the previous record-holder for megadroughts in the late 1500s and shows no signs of easing in the near future, according to a study Monday in the journal Nature Climate Change.</p> <p>The study calculated that 42% of this megadrought can be attributed to human-caused climate change.</p> <p>“Climate change is changing the baseline conditions toward a drier, gradually drier state in the West and that means the worst-case scenario keeps getting worse,” said study lead author Park Williams, a climate hydrologist at UCLA. “This is right in line with what people were thinking of in the 1900s as a worst-case scenario. But today I think we need to be even preparing for conditions in the future that are far worse than this.”</p> <p>Williams studied soil moisture levels in the West — a box that includes California, Wyoming, Utah, Nevada, Arizona, most of Oregon and Idaho, much of New Mexico, western Colorado, northern Mexico, and the southwest corners of Montana and Texas — using modern measurements and tree rings for estimates that go back to the year 800. That's about as far back as estimates can reliably go with tree rings.</p> <p>A few years ago, Williams studied the current drought and said it qualified as a lengthy and deep “megadrought” and that the only worse one was in the 1500s. He figured the current drought wouldn't surpass that one because megadroughts tended to peter out after 20 years. And, he said, 2019 was a wet year so it looked like the western drought might be coming to an end.</p> <p>But the region dried up in late 2020 and 2021.</p> <p>All of California was considered in official drought from mid-May until the end of 2021, and at least three-quarters of the state was at the highest two drought levels from June through Christmas, according to the U.S. drought monitor.</p> <p>“For this drought to have just cranked up back to maximum drought intensity in late 2020 through 2021 is a quite emphatic statement by this 2000s drought saying that we're nowhere close to the end,” Williams said. This drought is now 5% drier than the old record from the 1500s, he said.</p> <p>The drought monitor says 55% of the U.S. West is in drought with 13% experiencing the two highest drought levels.</p>

This megadrought really kicked off in 2002 — one of the driest years ever, based on humidity and tree rings, Williams said.

“I was wondering if we’d ever see a year like 2002 again in my life and in fact, we saw it 20 years later, within the same drought,” Williams said. The drought levels in 2002 and 2021 were a statistical tie, though still behind 1580 for the worst single year.

Climate change from the burning of fossil fuels is bringing hotter temperatures and increasing evaporation in the air, scientists say.

Williams used 29 models to create a hypothetical world with no human-caused warming then compared it to what happened in real life — the scientifically accepted way to check if an extreme weather event is due to climate change. He found that 42% of the drought conditions are directly from human-caused warming. Without climate change, he said, the megadrought would have ended early on because 2005 and 2006 would have been wet enough to break it.

The study “is an important wake-up call,” said Jonathan Overpeck, dean of environment at the University of Michigan, who wasn’t part of the study. “Climate change is literally baking the water supply and forests of the Southwest, and it could get a whole lot worse if we don’t halt climate change soon.”

Williams said there is a direct link between drought and heat and the increased wildfires that have been devastating the West for years. Fires need dry fuel that drought and heat promote.

Eventually, this megadrought will end by sheer luck of a few good rainy years, Williams said. But then another one will start.

Daniel Swain, a UCLA climate scientist who wasn’t involved in the study, said climate change is likely to make megadrought “a permanent feature of the climate of the Colorado River watershed during the 21st century.”

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HEADLINE	02/14 Questions remain over Seattle missing texts
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3350413/forensic-report-timeline-mayor-durkan-missing-texts/
GIST	<p>A newly-released forensic report confirms that missing text messages from former Seattle Mayor Jenny Durkan’s phone were the result of a retention setting in her phone being reconfigured in early July of 2020.</p> <p>In August of 2020, Durkan’s then-legal counsel, Michelle Chen, discovered that the mayor’s text messages between August 2019 and June 2020 had not been retained. According to whistleblower complaints from Public Records Officers Stacy Irwin and Kim Ferreiro, Chen later directed them to “narrowly interpret 48 pending requests ... identified as requesting the Mayor’s text messages,” in an attempt to conceal the fact that the messages were missing.</p> <p>It was later discovered that text messages spanning the summer of 2020 from devices belonging to then-Seattle Police Chief Carmen Best, multiple members of SPD’s command staff, and Fire Chief Harold Scoggins had also disappeared.</p> <p>That had a California-based cybersecurity company tasked by the Seattle City Attorney’s Office with compiling a forensic report to determine how the texts from city leaders had gone missing. Released last Friday, the report found that sometime between July 4 and July 22, 2020, the retention setting on Durkan’s phone was changed to automatically delete any text messages older than 30 days on a nightly rolling basis. The setting was then reconfigured to retain all messages indefinitely sometime between July 22 and July 26.</p>

For Chief Best, the report found that she had deleted text message conversations “periodically,” consistent with an explanation she had delivered in a deposition.

Missing messages from both Durkan and Best also coincided with ongoing social justice protests across the Seattle area, as well as the creation of the Capitol Hill Occupied Protest in late June, and its subsequent dismantling days before Durkan’s retention settings were changed to automatically delete old messages.

According to [a statement from Durkan to the Seattle Times](#), her phone had “fallen into salt water” on July 4. She claims that when she was issued a new phone on July 9, the city’s information technology department had configured the phone with the 30-day text message retention setting. That said, the forensic report indicated that the setting may have been reconfigured prior to her being issued the new phone, casting some doubt on her alleged timeline.

There are also questions surrounding why the city’s IT department would configure a new phone with settings that would compromise record-keeping.

“When I worked for the City of Seattle I had two city issued iPhones during my tenure, and both were setup to retain messages forever,” former Communications Director for Seattle’s Office of Economic Development Joe Mirabella [said on Twitter](#). “IT knew messages needed to be retained and everyone who works for the city is trained in records retention.”

That said, Durkan asserts that the report proves she was not the one responsible for deleting the missing messages, and that she had believed her phone was retaining her texts all along.

“As I have said all along, I did not change the retention settings on my phone and intentionally delete any data,” she told the Times. “The forensic report confirms my actions did not delete messages from the phone.”

Meanwhile, there are multiple active lawsuits filed against the city involving the missing texts. That includes Irwin and Ferreiro — the two initial whistleblowers — [who are suing](#) over claims that they were retaliated against and eventually forced to quit their jobs as public records officers. [The Seattle Times is suing](#) over how its public disclosure requests for the messages were handled.

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[Public records expert: Missing texts from city leaders are ‘very suspicious’](#)

HEADLINE	02/14 Antarctica undergoing ‘major change’
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/feb/14/flourishing-plants-show-warming-antarctica-undergoing-major-change-aoe
GIST	<p>Antarctica’s two native flowering plants are spreading rapidly as temperatures warm, according to the first study to show changes in fragile polar ecosystems have accelerated in the past decade.</p> <p>The increase in plants since 2009 has been greater than the previous 50 years combined, coinciding with rapidly rising air temperatures and a reduction in the number of fur seals, according to researchers working on Signy Island in the South Orkney Islands.</p> <p>Populations of Antarctic hairgrass (<i>Deschampsia antarctica</i>) and Antarctic pearlwort (<i>Colobanthus quitensis</i>) have been studied by scientists on the island since 1960. Research found hairgrass spread five times faster between 2009 and 2018 than between 1960 and 2009. For pearlwort, the increase was almost ten times more, according to the paper.</p> <p>In the past decade, summer warming has increased from +0.02C to +0.27C each year, despite strong cooling recorded in 2012.</p> <p>“Antarctic terrestrial ecosystems respond quickly to these climatic inputs,” said lead researcher Prof Nicoletta Cannone, from the University of Insubria in Como, Italy. “I was expecting an increase of these</p>

plants but not of this magnitude, we are receiving multiple evidences that a major change is occurring in Antarctica.”

The primary driver of change is warming summer air, according to the study, which provides one of the longest records of changes in vegetation in Antarctica. A secondary reason is there are fewer fur seals on the island, which trample on the plants. It is not known why the number of seals has declined but it is likely to be related to changes in food availability and sea conditions.

Analysis shows that fur seals influenced changes from 1960 to 2009, while the main driver between 2009 and 2018 was temperature increase.

Warming trends are expected to continue, with more ice-free areas created over the coming decades, and scientists say the findings from Signy Island are representative of processes happening in the region more generally. “Our findings support the hypothesis that future warming will trigger significant changes in these fragile Antarctic ecosystems,” researchers [wrote in the paper](#), published in Current Biology.

The spread of these species will cause changes in soil acidity, the bacteria and fungi in the soil, and in how organic matter decomposes. Changes in soil chemistry, as well as degradation of permafrost, will cause a cascade of changes, with “consequences on all components of terrestrial ecosystems”, said Cannone.

The plants are adapted to a very short growing season and are able to photosynthesise in snowy conditions with air temperatures below 0C. Despite being able to reproduce quickly and in harsh climatic conditions, they are not good at competing with other non-native plants. Although warming may benefit some native species in isolation, it greatly increases the risk of the establishment of non-native species that could outcompete native species and trigger irreversible wildlife loss, researchers warn.

In 2018, for example, an invasive grass species called *Poa annua* – which is often used on golf courses – colonised Signy Island. Cannone said: “The ingress of alien species can induce a dramatic loss of the native biodiversity of Antarctica which required million of years of evolution and survival. Moreover, the vegetation change will imply a domino effect on the whole biota of the terrestrial ecosystems.”

During the mid-Pliocene, the Antarctic experienced warming events that allowed the spontaneous migration of species from South America to Antarctica, and the other way around. Current levels of warming could have already triggered such migrations of mosses, lichens, vascular plants and invertebrates, facilitated by human activity – namely increasing levels of tourism – in the Antarctic, scientists warn.

Dr Kevin Newsham, a terrestrial ecologist at British Antarctic Survey, who was not involved in the study, said: “The study shows that further increases in populations of these plant species can be expected as Antarctica warms in future decades, leading to a greening of the region, but that there may also be increased risks to ecosystems associated with the establishment of alien plant species.”

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HEADLINE	02/15 On Mars: a year of surprise and discovery
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/15/science/mars-nasa-perseverance.html?action=click&module=Well&pgtype=Homepage&section=Science
GIST	<p>A year ago, NASA’s Perseverance rover was accelerating to a collision with Mars, nearing its destination after a 290-million-mile, seven-month journey from Earth.</p> <p>On Feb. 18 last year, the spacecraft carrying the rover pierced the Martian atmosphere at 13,000 miles per hour. In just seven minutes — what NASA engineers call “seven minutes of terror” — it had to pull off a series of maneuvers to place Perseverance gently on the surface.</p> <p>Given the minutes of delay for radio communications to crisscross the solar system, the people in mission control at NASA’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory in California were merely spectators that day. If anything</p>

had gone wrong, they would not have had any time to attempt a fix, and the \$2.7 billion mission, to search for evidence that something once lived on the red planet, would have ended in a newly excavated crater. But Perseverance performed perfectly, [sending home exhilarating video footage as it landed](#). And NASA added to its collection of robots exploring Mars.

“The vehicle itself is just doing phenomenally well,” Jennifer Trosper, the project manager for Perseverance, said.

Twelve months later, Perseverance is nestled within [a 28-mile-wide crater known as Jezero](#). From the topography, it is evident that more than three billion years ago, Jezero was a body of water roughly the size of Lake Tahoe, with rivers flowing in from the west and out to the east.

One of the first things Perseverance did was deploy Ingenuity, a small robotic helicopter and the first such flying machine to take off on another planet. Perseverance also demonstrated a technology for generating oxygen that will be crucial whenever astronauts finally make it to Mars.

The rover then set off on a diversion from the original exploration plans, to study the floor of the crater it landed in. The rocks there turned out not to be what scientists were expecting. It ran into trouble a couple of times when it tried to collect cores of rock — cylinders about the size of sticks of chalk — that are eventually to be brought back to Earth by a future mission. Engineers were able to solve the problems and most everything is going well.

“It’s been a very exciting year, exhausting at times,” said Joel Hurowitz, a professor of geosciences at Stony Brook University in New York who is a member of the mission’s science team. “The pace of work has been pretty incredible.”

After months of scrutinizing the crater floor, the mission team is now preparing to head for the main scientific event: investigating a dried-up river delta along the west rim of Jezero.

That is where scientists expect to find sedimentary rocks that are most likely to contain blockbuster discoveries, maybe even signs of ancient Martian life — if any ancient life ever existed on Mars.

“Deltas are, at least on Earth, habitable environments,” said Amy Williams, a professor of geology at the University of Florida and a member of the Perseverance science team. “There’s water. There’s active sediment being transported from a river into a lake.”

Such sediments can capture and preserve carbon-based molecules that are associated with life. “That’s an excellent place to look for organic carbon,” Dr. Williams said. “So hopefully, organic carbon that’s indigenous to Mars is concentrated in those layers.”

Perseverance landed not much more than a mile from the delta. Even at a distance, the rover’s eagle-eyed camera could make out the expected sedimentary layers. There were also boulders, some as large as cars, sitting on the delta, rocks that were washed into the crater.

“This all tells a fascinating story,” said Jim Bell, a planetary scientist at Arizona State University.

The data confirm that what orbital images suggested was a river delta is indeed that and that the history of water here was complex. The boulders, which almost certainly came from the surrounding highlands, point to episodes of violent flooding at Jezero.

“It wasn’t just slow, gentle deposition of fine grained silt and sand and mud,” said Dr. Bell, who serves as principal investigator for the sophisticated cameras mounted on Perseverance’s mast.

Mission managers had originally planned to head directly to the delta from the landing site. But the rover set down in a spot where the direct route was blocked by sand dunes that it could not cross.

The geological formations to the south intrigued them.

“We landed in a surprising location, and made the best of it,” said Kenneth Farley, a geophysicist at the California Institute of Technology who serves as the project scientist leading the research.

Because Jezero is a crater that was once a lake, the expectation was that its bottom would be rocks that formed out of the sediments that settled to the bottom.

But at first glance, the lack of layers meant “they did not look obviously sedimentary,” said Kathryn Stack Morgan of NASA’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory, the deputy project scientist. At the same time, nothing clearly suggested they were volcanic in origin, either.

“It’s really turned into a detective story sort of about why this region is one of the most geologically unusual in the planet,” said Nicholas Tosca, a professor of mineralogy and petrology at the University of Cambridge in England and a member of the science team.

As the scientists and engineers contemplated whether to circle around to the north or to the south, the team that built a robotic helicopter named Ingenuity got to try out their creation.

The helicopter was a late addition to the mission, meant as a proof-of-concept for flying through the thin air of Mars.

On April 18 last year, Ingenuity rose to a height of 10 feet, hovered for 30 seconds, and then descended back to the ground. The flight lasted 39.1 seconds.

Over the following weeks, Ingenuity made four more flights of increasing time, speed and velocity.

That was supposed to be the end of the helicopter’s mission. Perseverance was to leave it behind and head off on its scientific research.

But NASA decided five flights were not enough. When Perseverance set off to explore the rocks to the south, [Ingenuity went along, now scouting the terrain ahead of the rover.](#)

That helped avoid wasting time driving to unexceptional rocks that had looked potentially interesting in images taken from orbit.

“We sent the helicopter and saw the images, and it looked very similar to where we were,” Ms. Trosper said. “And so we chose not to drive.”

The helicopter continues to fly. It just completed its 19th flight, and it remains in good condition. The batteries are still holding a charge. The helicopter has shown it can fly in the colder, thinner air of the winter months. It was able to shake off most of the dust that fell on it during a dust storm in January.

“Everything’s looking green across the board,” said Theodore Tzanetos, who leads the Ingenuity team at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory.

In the exploration of the rocks to the south of the landing site, scientists solved some of their secrets when the rover used its drill to grind shallow holes in a couple of them.

“Oh wow, these look volcanic,” Dr. Stack Morgan said, remembering her reaction. “Exactly what you’d expect for a basaltic lava flow.”

The tools that Perseverance carries to study the ingredients of Martian rocks can take measurements pinpointed on bits of rock as small as a grain of sand. And cameras on the robotic arm can take close-up pictures.

Those observations revealed large grains of olivine, an igneous mineral that can accumulate at the bottom of a large lava flow. Later fractures emerged between the olivine grains that were filled with carbonates, a mineral that forms through interactions with water.

The thinking now is that the Jezero crater floor is the same olivine-rich volcanic rock that orbiting spacecraft have observed in the region. It might have formed before the crater filled with water.

Sediments from the lake probably did cover the rock, with water percolating through the sediments to fill the fractures with carbonate. Then, slowly, over a few billion years, winds blew the sediments away.

That the wispy air on Mars could erode so much rock is hard for geologists on Earth to wrap their minds around.

“You don’t find landscapes that are even close to that on Earth,” Dr. Farley said.

The most troublesome moments during the first year have occurred during the collection of rock samples. For decades, planetary scientists have dreamed that pieces of Mars could be brought to Earth, where they could study them with state-of-the-art instruments in laboratories.

Perseverance is the first step in turning that dream into reality by drilling cores of rock and sealing them in tubes. The rover, however, has no means to get the rock samples off Mars and back to Earth; that awaits [another mission known as Mars Sample Return](#), a collaboration between NASA and the European Space Agency.

During the development of Perseverance’s drill, engineers tested it with a wide variety of Earth rocks. But then [the very first rock on Mars that Perseverance tried to drill](#) turned out to be unlike all of the Earth rocks.

The rock in essence turned to dust during the drilling and slid out of the tube. After several successes, another drilling attempt ran into problems. Pebbles fell out of the tube in an inconvenient part of the rover — the carousel where the drilling bits are stored — and that required weeks of troubleshooting to clean away the debris.

“That was exciting, not necessarily in the best way,” Dr. Stack Morgan said. “The rest of our exploration has gone really well.”

Perseverance will at some point drop off some of its rock samples for a rover on the Mars Sample Return mission to pick up. That is to prevent the nightmare scenario that Perseverance dies and there is no way to extricate the rocks it is carrying.

The top speed of Perseverance is the same as that of Curiosity, the rover NASA landed in another crater in 2012. But improved self-driving software means it can cover longer distances in a single drive. To get to the delta, Perseverance needs to retrace its path to the landing site and then take a route around the sand dunes to the north.

It could arrive at the delta by late May or early June. Ingenuity will try to stay ahead of Perseverance.

The helicopter flies faster than the rover can drive, but after each flight, its solar panels have to soak up several days of sunshine to recharge the batteries. Perseverance, powered by the heat from a hunk of plutonium, can drive day after day after day.

The helicopter, however, might be able to take a shortcut across the sand dunes.

“We’re planning to get to the delta,” Mr. Tzanetos said. “And we’re discussing what happens beyond the river delta.”

	<p>But, he added that every day could be the last for Ingenuity, which was designed to last only a month. “You hope that you’re lucky enough to keep flying,” he said, “and we’re going to keep that streak going for as long as we can.”</p> <p>Once Perseverance gets to the delta, the most electrifying discovery would be images of what looked to be microscopic fossils. In that case, “we have to start asking whether some globs of organic matter are arranged in a shape that outlines a cell,” said Tanja Bosak, a geobiologist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.</p> <p>It is unlikely Perseverance will see anything that is unequivocally a remnant of a living organism. That is why it is crucial for the rocks to be brought to Earth for closer examination.</p> <p>Dr. Bosak does not have a strong opinion on whether there was ever life on Mars.</p> <p>“We are really trying to peer into the time where we have very little knowledge,” she said. “We have no idea when chemical processes came together to form the first cell. And so we may be looking at something that was just learning to be life.”</p>
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HEADLINE	02/14 Undiscovered coronavirus: ‘Russian flu’?
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/14/health/russian-flu-coronavirus.html
GIST	<p>In May 1889, people living in Bukhara, a city that was then part of the Russian Empire, began sickening and dying. The respiratory virus that killed them became known as the Russian flu. It swept the world, overwhelming hospitals and killing the old with special ferocity.</p> <p>Schools and factories were forced to close because so many students and workers were sick. Some of the infected described an odd symptom: a loss of smell and taste. And some of those who recovered reported a lingering exhaustion.</p> <p>The Russian flu finally ended a few years later, after at least three waves of infection.</p> <p>Its patterns of infection and symptoms have led some virologists and historians of medicine to now wonder: Might the Russian flu actually have been a pandemic driven by a coronavirus? And could its course give us clues about how our pandemic will play out and wind down?</p> <p>If a coronavirus caused the Russian flu, some believe that pathogen may still be around, its descendants circulating worldwide as one of the four coronaviruses that cause the common cold. If so, it would be different from flu pandemics whose viruses stick around for a while only to be replaced by new variants years later that cause a new pandemic.</p> <p>If that is what happened to the Russian flu, it might bode well for the future. But there is another scenario. If today’s coronavirus behaves more like the flu, immunity against respiratory viruses is fleeting. That might mean a future of yearly Covid shots.</p> <p>But, some historians voice caution about the Russian flu hypothesis.</p> <p>“There is very little, almost no hard data” on the Russia flu pandemic, said Frank Snowden at Yale.</p> <p>There is, though, a way to solve the mystery of the Russian flu. Molecular biologists now have the tools to pull shards of old virus from preserved lung tissue from Russian flu victims and figure out what sort of virus it was.</p> <p>Some researchers are now on the hunt for such preserved tissue in museums and medical schools that might have old jars of specimens floating in preservative fluid that still contain fragments of lung.</p>

The Russian Flu

Tom Ewing of Virginia Tech, one of the few historians who has studied the Russian flu, can't help noticing striking parallels with today's coronavirus pandemic: Institutions and workplaces shut down because too many people were ill; physicians overwhelmed with patients; and waves of infection.

"I would say, maybe," Dr. Ewing said when asked if the Russian flu was a coronavirus.

Dr. Scott Podolsky, a professor of global health and social medicine at Harvard Medical School, called the idea "plausible."

And Dr. Arnold Monto, professor of public health, epidemiology and global health at the University of Michigan, considered it "a very interesting speculation."

"We have long wondered where coronaviruses came from," Dr. Monto said. "Has there ever been a coronavirus pandemic in the past?"

Harald Bruessow, a retired Swiss microbiologist and editor of the journal Microbial Biotechnology, points to [a paper published in 2005](#) concluding that another coronavirus circulating today, known as OC43, which causes severe colds, may have jumped from cows to humans in 1890.

Three other less virulent coronaviruses circulate, too. Perhaps one of those viruses, or OC43, is a variant left over from the Russian flu pandemic.

Dr. Bruessow, while acknowledging the uncertainties, would bet that the [Russian flu was caused by a coronavirus](#). His work, which involved delving into old newspaper and journal articles, and public health reports on the Russian flu, uncovered that some patients had complained about conditions like a loss of taste and smell and long Covid-like symptoms.

Some historians speculated that the 19th century's fin de siècle lassitude might actually have been caused by sequelae of the Russian flu.

Such symptoms are not typical of flu pandemics.

Like Covid, Dr. Bruessow reports, the Russian flu seems to have preferentially killed older people but not children. Dr. Ewing, examining 1890 records from the State Board of Health in Connecticut, found [a similar pattern](#). If true, that would make the 1890 virus unlike influenza viruses which kill the very young as well as the very old.

But historical records cannot readily answer the question of whether a coronavirus caused the Russian flu. And Dr. Snowden of Yale cautioned that any lessons he could draw from that pandemic that could apply to a world in which the novel coronavirus has shaken societies would be "fantasy."

At this point, the idea that the Russian flu might have been caused by a coronavirus remains speculative, said Peter Palese, a flu researcher and professor of medicine at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai in New York. There is nothing, he said, that clearly ties the Russian flu pandemic to a coronavirus and excludes influenza.

But for those seeking hints to how the current coronavirus pandemic might end, some think those past two pandemics could offer a clue.

As the Russian flu pandemic waned, said J. Alexander Navarro, a historian at the University of Michigan, "people rather quickly went on with their lives." It was the same with the 1918 flu pandemic. Newspaper stories about it dwindled. And, he said, "grieving was almost entirely a private affair."

"I highly suspect that the same will occur today," Dr. Navarro said.

“In fact, in many ways, I think it already has.”

When Pandemics Burn Out

Quite a few pandemics — at least in the past 100 years when their causes can be known — have been caused by respiratory viruses. Recent exceptions are Zika and chikungunya — old mosquito-borne viruses — and H.I.V., which is spread by sexual intercourse and sharing needles.

Great plagues terrorized humanity in ancient and pre-modern times, most notably the bubonic plague. It was mostly spread by rat fleas, and it ushered in a horrendous period, [killing multitudes among the European population](#) from 1347 to 1352. So many died that they were buried in pits, in piles.

The bubonic plague kept returning to Europe for centuries after it first emerged. But how that plague ended offers few relevant lessons for today’s pandemic.

Researchers have also been unable to find answers in animal studies. They have tried for decades to find general laws to predict how pandemics progress by infecting hundreds of thousands of mice with various viruses and bacteria, said Dr. George Davey Smith, professor of clinical epidemiology at the Bristol Medical School in England. The experiments went on year after year in England, Germany, the United States and Australia. All looked for ways to predict when and how an epidemic could end.

None were found.

“They couldn’t predict what was going to happen,” Dr. Davey Smith said.

So researchers trying to understand how respiratory pandemics conclude can only study the flu and the current coronavirus pandemic.

Only the flu pandemics have ended. That, said Dr. David Morens, a flu researcher and senior adviser to the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, is a real limitation in trying to understand the natural history of respiratory disease pandemics.

“We have only 104 years and four different pandemics to make predictions from,” he said.

Flu pandemics are also baffling.

The first of the four flu pandemics for which the virus is known began in 1918. The pandemic waned after three waves of infections and that virus, H1N1, remained in circulation, in a less virulent form until 1957, when it disappeared.

“As far as we could tell, in 1957, that virus was gone forever,” Dr. Morens said.

Then H2N2 emerged. It was substantially different from H1N1 and caused a pandemic. That pattern repeated itself with H3N2 emerging in 1968.

But in 1977, something strange happened. H1N1 came back after being gone for two decades. It and another virus, H3N2, have been circulating ever since.

“Until 1977, we never had two subtypes circulating at the same time,” Dr. Monto said. “We don’t understand why one subtype pushed out the other and why it didn’t happen in 1977.”

And in 2009, the H1N1 that had re-entered the human population in 1977 was displaced by a genetically distinct version that came from pigs, causing another pandemic.

But why would a new variant make the previous one go away?

That, Dr. Morens said, “is another mystery.”

At least there are vaccines which are useful against the flu. But they have to be administered every year because of waning immunity. In [a study in England](#) with common cold coronaviruses, researchers found that immunity from infections with these viruses also diminishes within a year.

“Would we need a Covid vaccine every year?” asked Dr. Jeffery Taubenberger, chief of the viral pathogenesis and evolution section at the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases. “That’s the direction we’re heading.”

Then there is the question of why the Russian flu, and now the Covid pandemic produced waves of escalating and declining mortality.

“We are pretty clueless, and this extends to the waves we are seeing over the past two years with Covid,” Dr. Morens said. The evolution of viruses is not the full answer, he added.

“There are no good explanations I know of.”

Hunting Russian Flu Samples

The mysteries about the evolution of flu viruses and flu pandemics lead back to the mystery of the Russian flu and the coronavirus hypothesis.

Some, like Dr. Navarro, the historian at the University of Michigan, said that he finds the evidence for the “interesting hypothesis” about the Russian flu “circumstantial at best.”

Dr. Taubenberger predicts better evidence will emerge. He and John Oxford, emeritus professor of virology at the University of London, have been looking for flu or coronavirus in old lung tissue from patients who were ill with a respiratory disease in the years before the 1918 flu. They had hoped to find them embedded in tiny blocks of paraffin no bigger than a pinky fingernail in the Royal London Hospital, a place that has tissue from patients dating back to around 1906.

“We sampled hundreds of tissues,” Dr. Taubenberger said, without finding viruses. “We continue to look,” he said.

But, he said, with renewed interest in the 1890 pandemic, he hopes some tissues containing the Russian flu virus — whatever it is — might be found, perhaps lying unnoticed in the basements of museums or medical schools in different corners of the world.

Finding the tissue, though, has been challenging.

“The people running institutions in which they might be housed very likely would have no way to easily access records about them,” Dr. Taubenberger said. “Paradoxically, genetic analysis of these samples would be less difficult than locating them in the first place.”

Dr. Podolsky of Harvard and Dominic W. Hall, the curator of the Warren Anatomical Museum at Harvard, are also looking for tissue archives that might have lung tissue from that era. Mr. Hall has been reaching out to those in charge of collections of tissue samples.

On Thursday, he spoke with Anna Dhody, director of the research institute at the Mütter Museum, a collection of anatomical specimens and items from medical history in Philadelphia. She thinks items in the museum’s climate-controlled storage room may help.

The archive contains jars of tissue from the late 19th century, including a few whole lungs, all floating in jars of pale yellow liquid, the alcohol that was used as a preservative.

With funding and the right technology, she says outside researchers may be able to analyze the specimens. The work, Ms. Dhody said, “is so imperative.”

	“It’s life and death information.”
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HEADLINE	02/15 Coastline century worth sea rise in 30yrs?
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/nation/us-could-see-a-centurys-worth-of-sea-rise-in-just-30-years/
GIST	<p>America’s coastline will see sea levels rise in the next 30 years by as much as they did in the entire 20th century, with major Eastern cities hit regularly with costly floods even on sunny days, a government report warns.</p> <p>By 2050, seas lapping against the U.S. shore will be 10 to 12 inches (0.25 to 0.3 meters) higher, with parts of Louisiana and Texas projected to see waters a foot and a half (0.45 meters) higher, according to a 111-page report issued Tuesday by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and six other federal agencies.</p> <p>“Make no mistake: Sea level rise is upon us,” said Nicole LeBoeuf, director of NOAA’s National Ocean Service.</p> <p>The projected increase is especially alarming given that in the 20th century, seas along the Atlantic coast rose at the fastest clip in 2,000 years.</p> <p>LeBoeuf warned that the cost will be high, pointing out that much of the American economy and 40% of the population are along the coast.</p> <p>However, the worst of the long-term sea level rise from the melting of ice sheets in Antarctica and Greenland probably won’t kick in until after 2100, said ocean service oceanographer William Sweet, the report’s lead author.</p> <p>Warmer water expands, and the melting ice sheets and glaciers adds more water to the worlds oceans.</p> <p>The report “is the equivalent of NOAA sending a red flag up” about accelerating the rise in sea levels, said University of Wisconsin-Madison geoscientist Andrea Dutton, a specialist in sea level rise who wasn’t part of the federal report. The coastal flooding the U.S. is seeing now “will get taken to a whole new level in just a couple of decades.”</p> <p>“We can see this freight train coming from more than a mile away,” Dutton said in an email. “The question is whether we continue to let houses slide into the ocean.”</p> <p>Sea level rises more in some places than others because of sinking land, currents and water from ice melt. The U.S. will get slightly more sea level rise than the global average. And the greatest rise in the U.S. will be on the Gulf and East Coasts, while the West Coast and Hawaii will be hit less than average, Sweet said.</p> <p>For example, between now and 2060, expect almost 25 inches (0.63 meters) of sea level rise in Galveston, Texas, and just under 2 feet (0.6 meters) in St. Petersburg, Florida, while only 9 inches (0.23 inches) in Seattle and 14 inches (0.36 meters) in Los Angeles, the report said.</p> <p>While higher seas cause much more damage when storms such as hurricanes hit the coast, they are becoming a problem even on sunny days.</p> <p>Cities such as Miami Beach, Florida; Annapolis, Maryland; and Norfolk, Virginia, already get a few minor “nuisance” floods a year during high tides, but those will be replaced by several “moderate” floods a year by mid-century, ones that cause property damage, the researchers said.</p> <p>“It’s going to be areas that haven’t been flooding that are starting to flood,” Sweet said in an interview. “Many of our major metropolitan areas on the East Coast are going to be increasingly at risk.”</p>

	<p>The western Gulf of Mexico coast, should get hit the most with the highest sea level rise — 16 to 18 inches (0.4 to 0.45 meters) — by 2050, the report said. And that means more than 10 moderate property-damaging sunny-day floods and one “major” high tide flood event a year.</p> <p>The eastern Gulf of Mexico should expect 14 to 16 inches (0.35 to 0.4 meters) of sea level rise by 2050 and three moderate sunny-day floods a year. By mid-century, the Southeast coast should get a foot to 14 inches (0.3 to 0.35 meters) of sea level rise and four sunny-day moderate floods a year, while the Northeast coast should get 10 inches to a foot (0.25 to 0.3 meters) of sea level rise and six moderate sunny-day floods a year.</p> <p>Both the Hawaiian Islands and Southwestern coast should expect 6 to 8 inches (0.15 to 0.2 meters) of sea level rise by mid-century, with the Northwest coast seeing only 4 to 6 inches (0.1 to 0.15 meters). The Pacific coastline will get more than 10 minor nuisance sunny-day floods a year but only about one moderate one a year, with Hawaii getting even less than that.</p> <p>And that’s just until 2050. The report is projecting an average of about 2 feet of sea level rise in the United States — more in the East, less in the West — by the end of the century.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/14 NOAA: Jan 2022 6th warmest on record
SOURCE	https://www.noaa.gov/news/january-2022-was-earths-6th-warmest-on-record
GIST	<p>The planet rang in 2022 with a remarkably warm January, ranking as the sixth-warmest January in 143 years of climate records.</p> <p>Antarctic sea ice coverage — also referred to as sea ice extent — was near a record low for the month, according to scientists at NOAA’s National Centers for Environmental Information.</p> <p>Here’s more from NOAA’s latest monthly global climate report:</p> <p>Climate by the numbers January 2022 The January global land and ocean surface temperature was 1.60 degrees F (0.89 of a degree C) above the 20th-century average, making it the sixth-warmest January in the 143-year climate record.</p> <p>Last month was also the 46th consecutive January and the 445th consecutive month with temperatures above the 20th-century average.</p> <p>South America saw its second-warmest January on record, behind January 2016. Asia had its fourth-warmest January on record, while Oceania’s temperature departure tied with 2001 as the seventh highest. Despite North America and Africa’s above-average January temperatures, they had their coldest January since 2009 and 2015, respectively.</p> <p>Other notable climate events from January 2022</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Polar sea ice coverage was low. Antarctic sea ice coverage for the month was 440,000 square miles below average — the second smallest January sea ice extent in the 44-year record. Only January 2017 had a smaller sea ice extent. Arctic sea ice extent for the month was 208,000 square miles below the 1981-2010 average, though it was the largest January extent since 2009. • Snow cover was about average. The Northern Hemisphere’s snow cover during January was slightly above the 1981-2010 average, at 18.26 million square miles. This was the largest January snow cover since 2017. • Tropical activity was near average. In January, six tropical storms formed around the world, which is typical for the month. The Northern Hemisphere had no tropical cyclones, which is also typical for January. Meanwhile, the Southern Hemisphere’s strongest cyclone of January 2022 —

	Major Cyclone Batsirai — developed in late January and made landfall in Madagascar in early February.
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HEADLINE	02/15 New procedure: woman cured of HIV
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/breakthrough-treatment-makes-woman-3rd-person-cured-hiv/story?id=82907276
GIST	<p>Researchers revealed on Tuesday that an American, described as a middle-aged woman of mixed race, has likely been cured of HIV after undergoing a new transplant procedure using donated umbilical cord blood.</p> <p>The patient, who needed a stem cell transplant for leukemia, reportedly developed a new HIV-resistant immune system following a breakthrough procedure in which she was genetically matched with umbilical cord stem cells that contained an HIV-resistant mutation.</p> <p>She was part of a study that began in 2015 designed to monitor outcomes of 25 people with HIV in the U.S. who underwent a transplant, according to the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases.</p> <p>Dr. Yvonne Bryson, an infectious disease physician at UCLA, who led the study, discussed their team's finding along with the patient's condition at the Conference on Retroviruses and Opportunistic Infections this week.</p> <p>"Today, we reported the third known case of HIV remission and the first woman following a stem cell transplant and using HIV-resistant cells," Bryson said in a press conference.</p> <p>"This case is special for several reasons: First, our participant was a U.S. woman living with HIV of mixed race, who needed a stem cell transplant for treatment of her leukemia. And she would find a more difficult time finding both a genetic match and one with the HIV-resistant mutation to both cure her cancer and potentially her HIV. This is a natural, but rare mutation."</p> <p>Bryson added that while this approach of using genetically-matched umbilical cord blood with HIV-resistant mutation opens the door to more diverse populations and studies, she confirmed there is no current routine screening in place in the U.S. for this mutation.</p> <p>Previously, only two men have been cured of HIV using a bone marrow or stem cell transplant. And while this is the third known case, according to Bryson's team, of HIV remission in an individual who received a stem cell transplant of any kind, experts in the field caution that this method is not ideal for curing the many millions of HIV-positive people around the globe today.</p> <p>Bryson said there could eventually be "approximately at least 50 [people] per year that may benefit from this."</p> <p>In an interview with Community Health Center, Inc., Dr. Anthony Fauci, the leading expert in infectious disease in the U.S., whose work in HIV care and treatment innovation spans four decades, said, "I don't want people to think that now this is something that can be applied to the 36 million people [globally] who are living with HIV."</p> <p>"This person had an underlying disease that required a stem cell transplant. ... It is not practical to think that this is something that's going to be widely available," Fauci added. "It's more of a proof of concept."</p> <p>While there is no practical and applicable cure for HIV on a large scale, there have been incredible strides in HIV treatment over the years that allow individuals to live a normal and healthy life.</p> <p>Known as U=U, or Undetectable=Untransmittable, if an HIV-positive person begins HIV treatment and brings the virus in their body to an undetectable level, the individual cannot transmit the virus to someone as long as they remain on said treatment or medication.</p>

Last month, the The U.S. Food and Drug Administration approved the [first long-acting injectable drug for HIV prevention](#).

Until recently, the only medications licensed and approved by the FDA for HIV prevention or pre-exposure prophylaxis, most commonly known as PrEP, were daily pills, which slow the progression of an HIV infection in the body.

PrEP is usually taken daily so that it builds up in in a person's system, to the point that if there is an HIV infection, it prevents the virus from replicating and spreading throughout the body.

When taken as prescribed, PrEP services reduce the risk of getting HIV from sex by about 99%, according to new data from the CDC. Now, individuals who feel at-risk of HIV infection have the option of taking the daily pill, or the new shot every two months, after two initiation injections administered one month apart.

On the vaccine front, Moderna recently announced that it's launched early stage clinical trials of an HIV mRNA vaccine. [ABC News previously reported](#) that the biotechnology company teamed up with the nonprofit International AIDS Vaccine Initiative to develop the shot, which uses the same technology as Moderna's successful COVID-19 vaccine.

Because bone marrow transplantation is a dangerous and risky procedure, it is considered unethical to perform on people with HIV, unless the person also has cancer and needs a transplant as part of their treatment.

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Crime, Criminals

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HEADLINE	02/15 Hate crimes spike in major cities
SOURCE	https://www.baynews9.com/fl/tampa/news/2022/02/14/hate-crime-increase-2021-asian-american-
GIST	<p>Many of the most populous cities across the country experienced an uptick in hate crimes last year, a trend that has continued since the start of the pandemic, according to a preliminary report from the Center for the Study of Hate & Extremism at California State University in San Bernardino.</p> <p>The FBI defines a hate crime as a “criminal offense against a person or property motivated in whole or in part by an offender’s bias against a race, religion, disability, sexual orientation, ethnicity, gender, or gender identity.”</p> <p>The study examined hate crimes across 16 of the biggest cities in the country, including New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston, Dallas, Denver and Louisville.</p> <p>Per the draft report, which has not yet been released to the public, those 16 cities experienced a cumulative 44% jump in reported hate crimes, up from 1,492 in 2020 to 2,150 in 2021. Phoenix, Sacramento, and Tampa – three additional cities examined in the study – were not included in the overall total, as their sample sizes were either too small, included non-criminal offenses or only represented partial-year totals.</p> <p>Los Angeles and New York reported the highest and second highest amounts, respectively, of “any U.S. city in the 21st century,” the report found in part. Antisemitic incidents were the most commonly reported hate crime in New York City, while Black Americans were the most-targeted group in the majority of other major cities.</p> <p>Reports of hate crimes against Asian Americans jumped 342% from 2020 to 2021, continuing a pattern from the previous year: Anti-Asian crimes increased 124% between 2019 and 2020.</p>

FBI data from 2020 indicated [there was a 77% increase](#) in Anti-Asian hate crimes, up from 158 in 2019 to 279 in 2020. The discrepancy between the FBI data and the draft report from CSUSB can be attributed to the differencing definitions of "hate crimes" between federal and state laws, particularly "with respect to homeless and political status in a small number of agencies such as Seattle and Washington, D.C.," the CSUSCB researchers wrote in part. The CSUSB study also examined select cities as opposed to the entire country.

While some jurisdictions have yet to report complete numbers from last year, the preliminary data showed that San Francisco and New York had the highest percentage changes in hate crimes between 2020 and 2021, at 100% and 96%, respectively.

According to preliminary figures released by the San Francisco police department in late January, reported hate crimes against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders were up an astonishing 567% from the previous year in the city.

Mayor London Breed pledged continued support for the community, saying she suspects actual numbers are much higher because people are reluctant to report to the police. The initial count shows 60 victims in 2021, up from nine in 2020. Half of last year's victims were allegedly targeted by one man.

Across the country, the Stop AAPI Hate coalition out of San Francisco State University tracked more than 10,000 incidents of hate from March 2020 through September 2021.

The disturbing spike in hate crimes against the Black community began in early 2020 following the murder of George Floyd in March. A number of high-profile hate crimes cases are still in progress, including the trial for three white men convicted of the Feb. 2020 killing of 25-year-old Ahmaud Arbery. While the incident occurred before Floyd's death, arrests came only after the video leaked online two months later and became public knowledge.

Numerous Asian American organizations have said the increase in hate crimes against the Asian American community can be attributed, in part, to former president Donald Trump's racist rhetoric concerning the origins of COVID-19 in China, which they say emboldened people to express anti-Asian or anti-immigrant views.

The U.S. has experienced a series of fatal incidents targeting Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in recent months, including a series of deadly shootings last year.

More recently in January, 40-year-old Michelle Alyssa Go died after a mentally unstable man shoved her in front of an oncoming subway.

Just this weekend, Christina Yuna Lee, 35, [died after being stabbed](#) in her apartment. While police have not yet said if they are investigating the incident as a hate crime, New York City mayor Eric Adams on Sunday [tweeted](#) in part: "... we stand with our Asian community today."

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HEADLINE	02/14 Federal judges faced over 4500 threats 2021
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/us/us-judges-faced-over-4500-threats-2021-amid-rising-extremism-official-2022-02-14/
GIST	<p>U.S. federal judges were the target of more than 4,500 threats and other inappropriate communications last year, the head of the U.S. Marshals Service said on Monday, adding that his office is concerned about the rise of domestic extremism in America.</p> <p>"The increase in our judicial ... threat investigations and inappropriate comments have been going up quite frankly for a couple of years," Ronald Davis, director of the U.S. Marshals Service, told journalists in a conference call. He said the threat risk is "growing exponentially."</p>

	<p>Federal law enforcement officials have sounded alarm bells about a growing tide of threats posed by white supremacists and anti-government activists, many of whom have touted former Republican President Donald Trump's false claims that the 2020 election was stolen.</p> <p>Earlier this year, Attorney General Merrick Garland launched a task force aimed at combating threats targeting state election workers and volunteers, an effort that so far has led to two criminal cases.</p> <p>Garland has also instructed the FBI to work with local officials to monitor an increase in threats to school boards, which have faced an onslaught of criticism over issues ranging from mask mandates to the teaching of critical race theory.</p> <p>The threats to judges were varied and in some cases came from disgruntled defendants, Davis said. In one example, a self-described anti-feminist attorney in 2020 shot and killed the son of federal judge Esther Salas at her home in New Jersey. In the attack, Roy Den Hollander also wounded Salas's husband. Hollander was later found dead in an apparent suicide in upstate New York.</p> <p>The U.S. Marshals Service is tasked with protecting courts across the country's 94 federal district courts, in addition to transporting prisoners and helping to locate fugitives.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/16 Details: visas for victims human trafficking
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/02/16/new-details-revealed-visas-given-victims-human-trafficking/
GIST	<p>Three years ago, while fact-checking what we described as “fantastical human-trafficking claims” by President Donald Trump, we discovered that the federal government did not publish a breakdown by nationality of visas given to victims of human trafficking, which are known as T visas.</p> <p>It was a strange gap in the data. The best information we could provide was to note that 40 percent of T-derivative visas, for family members, were issued by the U.S. Embassy in Manila. We were frustrated enough by this issue that we even sent a note to staff members for key congressional committees urging that this data be made public.</p> <p>With little public notice, the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), an arm of the Department of Homeland Security, recently released a breakdown on 14 years of human-trafficking visas in a fact sheet.</p> <p>T visas, created in 2000 when Congress passed the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act, are available only to victims of human trafficking and require that the applicant be in the United States or at a port of entry “on account of” trafficking. Visa applicants also are expected to assist in the investigation or prosecution of human trafficking. (There’s also another type of visa, the U Visa, for victims of serious crime who assist law enforcement.)</p> <p>“This report was created as a tool for the general public to understand and recognize the characteristics of T Visa applicants and was published in January 2022 as part of USCIS’s commitment to supporting and protecting victims of human trafficking and other serious crimes,” said Anita Rios Moore, a USCIS spokeswoman, in a statement to the Fact Checker.</p> <p>We’re publishing some highlights to draw attention to the new data. We’ve noted before the paucity of reliable data on sex trafficking — and how what numbers are available indicate that many politicians rely on exaggerated figures.</p> <p>Trump, for instance, had — without any evidence — claimed in his 2019 State of the Union address that “thousands of young girls and women” were being smuggled between ports of entry and being sold “into prostitution and modern-day slavery.”</p>

It's important to remember that most foreign nationals who are trafficked come through legal ports of entry. [Data collected by the United Nations' International Organization on Migration](#), analyzing 10 years of information on more than 90,000 victims, has found that 79 percent of international trafficking journeys "go through official border points, such as airports and land border control points." The IOM said that "about a third of official border points are crossed by bus, another third by train, and 20 percent by plane."

From fiscal 2008 to fiscal 2021, people born in six countries accounted for 71 percent of the T visas, the USCIS revealed in the fact sheet. As we suspected, the Philippines was first, with 22 percent, followed by Mexico (20 percent), India (9 percent), Honduras (9 percent), Guatemala (7 percent) and Thailand (7 percent).

These numbers represent both T visas and T-derivative visas. Moore said that if just visas issued to victims were counted, the order of the top six countries would be in a slightly different order: Mexico, the Philippines, Honduras, India, Guatemala and Thailand.

By statute, no more than 5,000 principal T visas may be granted in any fiscal year, but there is no cap for derivative family members. (About 59 percent of the derivative visas are for children.)

The first headline in the fact sheet says "USCIS Has Received More Than 25,000 T Visa Applications and Approved More Than 17,000," but you have to read deeply into the document to learn that the total number of victims who received visas over the 14-year period was just 8,550, for both sex and labor trafficking. The other 8,860 visas were for derivative family members.

The actual breakdown between the two types of trafficking is not clear because it is not always collected.

"USCIS Form [I-914, Application for T Nonimmigrant Status](#), does not have a field where an applicant indicates the trafficking type, but the [Form I-914, Supplement B, Declaration of Law Enforcement Officer for Victim of Trafficking in Persons](#) specifically asks for this information and gives us the ability to gather this characteristic," Moore said. Supplement B is optional but allows applicants to demonstrate they are victims of a severe form of trafficking.

Only 16 percent, or 1,368 people, of the 8,550 principal visa applicants filled out supplement B. Of that group, 74 percent listed labor trafficking as the form of trafficking while 39 percent listed sex trafficking; only 8.6 percent — 120 people — reported they were sex-trafficked as a minor. Some supplement B forms included both labor and sex trafficking, which is why the total adds up to more than 100 percent.

These percentages suggest labor trafficking is a bigger problem than sex trafficking. In any case, the number of visas given to victims of human trafficking is relatively small — an average of about 600 a year. That's far below the 5,000 annual cap.

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HEADLINE	02/15 Victim rape kit DNA identify crime suspects
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/15/us/san-francisco-police-rape-kit-dna.html
GIST	<p>DNA samples collected from victims of sexual assault are being used by the San Francisco Police Department to identify them as possible suspects in other crimes, the San Francisco district attorney charged this week, adding that he would encourage legislation to ban the practice.</p> <p>The victims of sexual assault whose DNA samples are used in this way "are being treated like criminals," the district attorney, Chesa Boudin, said in a statement on Monday. "This practice treats victims like evidence, not human beings. This is legally and ethically wrong."</p> <p>Aides to Mr. Boudin said the office learned of the practice last week when the Police Department identified a woman who was recently arrested on a felony property crime charge based on DNA samples that she had given earlier when she reported that she had been sexually assaulted. Her DNA had been collected by investigators in order to identify her attacker.</p>

On Tuesday, the district attorney's aides said that the recent use of the DNA material in this manner would affect the case against the woman, but they declined to elaborate.

The practice of using DNA from a rape kit to possibly identify the victim as a potential suspect in another matter is apparently widespread, according to Kate Chatfield, chief of staff to Mr. Boudin, who is the subject of a recall effort, testing the public's willingness to support progressive district attorneys amid headlines of rising crime. She said that using DNA from rape kits in this way might date back to 2015, when crime databases in the region were revamped.

After speaking with the director of the San Francisco Police Department's crime lab, Ms. Chatfield concluded: "This is a standard operating procedure in the field. So we don't think that this practice is necessarily limited to San Francisco."

Chief William Scott of the San Francisco Police Department said in a statement on Monday that although he had been told that the suspect in the case in question had not been identified through a rape kit, "the questions raised by our district attorney today are sufficiently concerning" that he had asked his staff to look into the matter.

"If it's true that DNA collected from a rape or sexual assault victim has been used by S.F.P.D. to identify and apprehend that person as a suspect in another crime, I'm committed to ending the practice," Chief Scott said. He also said, "We must never create disincentives for crime victims to cooperate with police."

He also emphasized that the department's "existing DNA collection policies have been legally vetted and conform with state and national forensic standards."

It was not immediately clear how many law enforcement agencies or crime labs use D.N.A. collected from victims of sexual assault to identify them as possible suspects in unrelated cases. Several law enforcement agencies contacted on Tuesday either denied using such tactics or did not respond to telephone calls and emails.

When asked if they use rape kits the way the San Francisco district attorney had complained about, Jeffrey F. Rosen, the district attorney in Santa Clara County, Calif., wrote in an email, "We absolutely do not." And Jodi Silva, a spokeswoman for the Houston Police Department, said, "Wow," adding that she was not aware of this being done at the department.

The Los Angeles Police Department said in a statement on Tuesday that it "does not and has never used" DNA from a sex assault victim to compare against that of a suspect from an unrelated crime.

Mr. Boudin said that he was encouraging local and state legislators to introduce legislation to end this practice in California. "We should encourage survivors to come forward — not collect evidence to use against them in the future," he said.

Advocates for rape victims bristled at the possibility that evidence used to catch attackers could actually be used against the victims.

"Rape survivors do not give law enforcement a blanket waiver of their rights to not self-incriminate," Pamela M. Tate, co-executive director of Black Women Revolt Against Domestic Violence, said in a statement released by the district attorney's office. "This type of misrepresentation will have a chilling effect to Black women and women of color in reporting crimes of sexual assault."

Camille Cooper, vice president of public policy at RAINN (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network), said in a statement that the practice described by Mr. Boudin was "horrifying and an egregious violation of the survivor's privacy" as well as "indefensible."

"Survivors who undergo rape kit exams," she went on to say, "have consented to the collection of their DNA for a very specific purpose: to catch the person who raped them."

HEADLINE	02/15 Honduras detains former president
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/15/world/americas/honduras-president-juan-orlando-hernandez-detained.html
GIST	<p>TEGUCIGALPA, Honduras — Honduran authorities detained former Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández on Tuesday to potentially face extradition and drug charges in the United States, capping a spectacular downfall for one of Central America’s most powerful men.</p> <p>Mr. Hernández, who led the country for eight years and stepped down less than a month ago, was escorted by security officers from his home, wearing a bulletproof vest and shackles that bound him hand and foot.</p> <p>“It’s not an easy moment, I don’t wish it on anybody,” Mr. Hernández said in an audio message posted on his Twitter profile at 5 a.m. on Tuesday.</p> <p>“I’m ready to present myself voluntarily and defend myself in accordance with the law,” he said in a separate message on Facebook, shortly after.</p> <p>Fireworks exploded around the Honduran capital of Tegucigalpa almost immediately after Mr. Hernández was led away from his home, and about a hundred protesters gathered around his residence to celebrate his detention. The former president is deeply unpopular, accused of allowing organized crime and corruption to penetrate the highest echelons of power, keeping Honduras one of the poorest and most violent countries in Latin America.</p> <p>“Justice has been served for Honduras,” said Ana María Torres, a university student who came to revel in Mr. Hernández’s arrest. “He left the country in ruins and now the gringos are going to take him so that he pays the price of being a narco.”</p> <p>Police trucks and black sports utility vehicles with tinted windows surrounded his home in an upmarket gated community on Monday night, just minutes after the country’s Foreign Ministry revealed that it had received an extradition request from the United States for a politician. On Tuesday morning, he opened his door to the authorities, who took him away.</p> <p>The extradition request, presented to Honduras’s Supreme Court and seen by The New York Times, claims Mr. Hernández participated in a “violent drug-trafficking conspiracy” that since 2004 has transported 500 tons of cocaine from Venezuela and Colombia to the United States via Honduras. The document claims that Mr. Hernández received millions of dollars in bribes for facilitating the shipments and shielding traffickers from prosecution.</p> <p>The former president’s brother, Juan Antonio Hernández, is serving a life sentence in the United States for cocaine trafficking. Another convicted cocaine trafficker who implicated the former president, Geovanny Fuentes, received the same sentence last week.</p> <p>Mr. Hernández is expected to be presented in court on Wednesday. In the past, he has repeatedly denied all drug-related accusations, claiming that unspecified voice recordings made by the Drug Enforcement Administration show his innocence.</p> <p>It is not clear if, or when, Mr. Hernández may be extradited to the United States and whether he will be accused of crimes at home. Honduras’s Supreme Court is expected to rule on whether to grant the extradition request.</p> <p>A Supreme Court judge who was named on Tuesday to hear Mr. Hernández’s case is affiliated with the former president’s party and has a history of absolving suspects in corruption cases, said Gabriela Castellanos, the head of National Anti-Corruption Council, an independent body created by congress.</p>

Honduras, which relies heavily on American aid, has never denied a U.S. extradition request, said Marlon Duarte, a Tegucigalpa-based lawyer who has participated in five extradition cases. But a case against a recent president has no precedent, and Mr. Hernández retains significant support in the judicial system, he said.

The legal battle that will decide Mr. Hernández's future could drag on for weeks or even months, said Mr. Duarte.

"We are putting the country's institutions to the test," he said. "We are about to see if the judicial system is part of the same criminal structure that the president is accused of creating."

[Honduras's new president, Xiomara Castro](#), has accused Mr. Hernández of turning the country into a "[narco-dictatorship](#)." She was swept to victory in November elections after promising to overhaul the system of [corruption and impunity](#) that flourished under Mr. Hernández, contributing [to a mass exodus](#) of its citizens to the United States.

But while Mr. Hernández's arrest appeared to show Ms. Castro's resolve to pursue tainted opponents, her initial actions have sown doubt about a fight against a broader culture of graft. Her allies in congress have passed a law that would effectively grant immunity to members of the administration of her husband and former president, Manuel Zelaya. And Ms. Castro has appointed several family members to serve in her government.

Mr. Hernández's extradition would be a significant foreign policy victory for the Biden Administration, which has struggled to assert influence in Central America and make good on its promise to reduce corruption in the region to help stem migration.

The Honduran ex-president's fate is likely to be closely followed in neighboring Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua, whose leaders have steadily dismantled anti-corruption institutions, over the Biden administration's protests, and whose inner circles have been implicated in graft scandals themselves.

In Honduras, Mr. Hernández is widely disliked, but still, many found the speed of his downfall surprising. He is a member of the Central American Parliament, which technically grants him immunity from prosecution, and his political party remains a major force in Honduras's congress.

"This is the first fundamental step in the fight begun by the citizens against a system of impunity in Honduras," said Josué Murillo, a Honduran political analyst and country head of the Pan American Development Foundation, a human rights nonprofit.

But Mr. Murillo said the country cannot advance until justice ceases to be a political weapon used to target government opponents. Mr. Hernández's possible extradition, he added, shows that the country's judicial system is often incapable of punishing crimes committed by the powerful.

"Our justice is contaminated by corruption," he said. "We need to urgently reform it to remove it from politics."

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HEADLINE	02/15 Spokane PD seize drugs, counterfeit money
SOURCE	https://www.krem.com/article/news/crime/spd-fentanyl-meth-counterfeit-money-recovered/293-a25b7b73-035c-4339-a216-c02c0b9f7a06
GIST	SPOKANE, Wash. — The Spokane Police Department (SPD) confiscated a "substantial" amount of narcotics and thousands of dollars in counterfeit money while responding to reports of a drive-by shooting in early February.

	<p>SPD patrol officers responded to reports of a drive-by shooting involving multiple vehicles at approximately 7:30 p.m. on Feb. 6, 2022. The shooting was reported at Nettleton and Rowan, according to police.</p> <p>Police located shell casings in the street and later noticed a vehicle stalled at Ash and Francis. Police said they witnessed two men leave the vehicle with a backpack and a five-gallon bucket. The man carrying the backpack and bucket allegedly left the items behind, hopped over a seven-foot fence, and ran away.</p> <p>Both suspects are still outstanding at this time, according to police.</p> <p>Officers collected the abandoned items and discovered an estimated 40,000 fentanyl pills and nine kilograms of methamphetamines bundled and marked. Police also said the abandoned vehicle had multiple bullet holes.</p> <p>SPD is working with the Drug Enforcement Administration's (DEA) Spokane District Office to identify the people responsible for the sale and distribution of the drugs.</p> <p>"The considerable influx of fentanyl and other highly addictive controlled substances to the Spokane area is a high priority for law enforcement," Spokane Police and Fire Public Safety Communication Manager Julie Humphreys said in a statement. "Large scale drug seizures such as this are becoming more common as we work to make the community safer for all."</p>
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HEADLINE	02/15 Tacoma grappling w/rising crime
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/local/tacoma-grappling-with-rising-crime-and-community-concerns-02-16-2022
GIST	<p>TACOMA, Wash. — Crimes against people and property are on the rise in Tacoma and community members are calling for changes.</p> <p>Angela Connelly, who leads a community group called Tacoma Safe, said criminals seem emboldened, police response is too slow and the crime rate feels like it's getting out of control.</p> <p>One of the more recent trends is armed thieves targeting cannabis stores. Armed thieves showed up Monday night just before closing time and caught the staff at Tacoma House of Cannabis completely by surprise.</p> <p>"They came in the door and it was between the turn and actually entering the door that both of the guns came out," said Kevin Heiderich, who owns the pot shop.</p> <p>The two men held workers at gunpoint and went straight for the cash, both in the registers and the back office. In the process workers got roughed up.</p> <p>"Little bit of physical violence, which is super upsetting to me, against the employees," Heiderich said.</p> <p>Over the weekend, someone broke into T&T Tire Point S and ransacked the store. The owner said he waited eight and a half hours for an officer to show up and take a report. Businesses throughout the city are frustrated by these lengthy delays, Connelly said.</p> <p>"There is a very long response time from 911," Connelly said. "Sometimes they don't even show up."</p> <p>Tacoma police chased down Tuesday and shot a man wanted for murder. The man was wounded and no officers were hurt, though several cars were struck during the pursuit.</p> <p>As for cannabis store robberies, six businesses in Tacoma have been hit in the past month and owners say federal laws that force them to deal only in cash don't help the problem.</p>

	<p>"Cannabis stores, because of the presence of cash in them, are definitely high-profile targets," Heiderich said.</p> <p>Tacoma has some disturbing trends when comparing last year's crime totals with 2020. The city saw 32 homicides in 2021 which is the same as the previous year. However, aggravated assaults are up 49.9 percent.</p> <p>In terms of property crimes, arson rose 79.9 percent year to year. Break-ins increase 10.2 percent and vandalism is up 15 percent.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/15 Seattle police: Ballard shooting; 1 injured
SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/man-injured-ballard-shooting/BIFCCCGB75CSBEPLLMUMI73OLI/
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — A man was injured in a shooting in Ballard on Tuesday evening, police said.</p> <p>Police responded around 5:15 p.m. to a shooting near 15th Avenue NW and NW Leary Way. Officers found a male victim with a non-life threatening gunshot wound to his hip.</p> <p>The Seattle Fire Department said the 49-year-old man was transported to Harborview Medical Center in stable condition.</p> <p>Before being transported, officials said the victim told police the shooting happened at an encampment and gave them a suspect description. Police are continuing to investigate.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/15 Covid outbreak grows southwest WA prison
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/law-justice/covid-outbreak-grows-at-southwest-wa-prison/
GIST	<p>YACOLT, Clark County — The number of active COVID-19 cases jumped to 41 among incarcerated individuals at Larch Corrections Center, a nearly 193% increase since Friday, according to a Monday bulletin from the Washington Department of Corrections.</p> <p>The minimum-security prison near Yacolt was placed on facility-wide outbreak status Feb. 7 after four inmates in the living unit tested positive. Incarcerated individuals who test positive are being temporarily relocated to the Elkhorn Unit to help stop the virus's spread, according to the department.</p> <p>Active cases among staff decreased from seven to six between Friday and Monday, the DOC bulletin shows.</p> <p>To date, 322 incarcerated individuals and 65 staff members have tested positive, according to the DOC. The majority of those cases came during an outbreak in late 2020, with more than 90% of the inmate population testing positive.</p> <p>In December, the most recent data available online, Larch's average daily population was 222, with a capacity of 240.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/15 Tacoma officer shoots murder suspect
SOURCE	https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/local/crime/article258432133.html
GIST	<p>A Tacoma Police Department officer shot a man in Lakewood on Tuesday afternoon while trying to arrest him for investigation of first-degree murder.</p> <p>The man shot by police was taken to a hospital with serious injuries, according to a news release from the Pierce County Force Investigation Team. No officers were injured.</p>

	<p>The man, who has not been identified, was wanted for the Feb. 7 death of Joshua Ferrell, according to Pierce County Sheriff's Department spokesperson Sgt. Darren Moss. Ferrell died from a gunshot wound to the shoulder after someone dropped him off at a local hospital.</p> <p>Ferrell was shot in the 8800 block of South Hosmer Street in the city's South End, according to Tacoma Police.</p> <p>On Tuesday, police were trying to apprehend the suspect in Ferrell's homicide just before noon in the 8700 block of South Hosmer Street, according to the release. TPD officers had an arrest warrant.</p> <p>The man fled and crashed his vehicle into several parked cars while leaving a parking lot.</p> <p>Police pursued him beyond the city limits into Pierce County, where he hit another vehicle at the intersection of 96th Street South and Sales Road South.</p> <p>Police continued to pursue the man into Lakewood along South Tacoma Way, where he crashed into two more vehicles where the road intersects with 88th Street South. Shortly after that collision, police shot the man.</p> <p>Officers performed first aid on him and called for fire crews to assist before he was taken to a hospital.</p> <p>The Pierce County Force Investigation Team was on the scene Tuesday looking into the shooting. PCFIT investigates all police uses of deadly force in the county. The police officer has not been identified.</p>
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HEADLINE	02/15 ADL report: murder, extremism in US 2021
SOURCE	https://www.adl.org/murder-and-extremism-2021
GIST	<p>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Every year people with ties to a variety of extreme movements and causes kill people in the United States; the ADL Center on Extremism tracks these murders. Extremists regularly commit murders in the service of their ideology, in the service of a group or gang they may belong to, or while engaging in traditional, non-ideological criminal activities. • In 2021, domestic extremists killed at least 29 people in the United States, in 19 separate incidents. This represents a modest increase from the 23 extremist-related murders documented in 2020 but is far lower than the number of murders committed in any of the five years prior (which ranged from 45 to 78). • The 2021 murder totals were low primarily because no high-casualty extremist-related shooting spree occurred this past year. Such sprees are the main contributor to high murder totals. • Most of the murders (26 of 29) were committed by right-wing extremists, which is usually the case. However, two killings were committed by Black nationalists and one by an Islamist extremist—the latter being the first such killing since 2018. • Most of the 2021 murders were committed by people associated with longstanding extremist movements, such as white supremacy and the sovereign citizen movement. However, 2021 continued the trend of recent years of seeing some murders from newer types of extremism, including QAnon adherents, people associated with the toxic masculinity subculture of the “manosphere” and anti-vaccination extremists. • White supremacists killed more people in 2021 than any other type of extremist, though not an outright majority, as is often the case. An in-depth look at white supremacist killings over the past 10 years demonstrates the dangers posed by alt right white supremacists and white supremacist prison gangs.
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HEADLINE	02/15 Mexico scientist pleads guilty: spying in US
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Technology/wireStory/mexico-scientist-pleads-guilty-spying-russia-miami-82904346

MIAMI -- A prominent Mexican scientist who led a double life with two families on separate continents pleaded guilty Tuesday to a charge of being co-opted by Russian agents into surveilling a U.S. government informant residing in Miami.

Hector Cabrera Fuentes was arrested in 2020 at Miami International Airport as he and his Mexican wife -- the other is from Russia -- were looking to return to their home in Mexico City.

A day earlier, Valentine's Day, the couple attracted the attention of a security guard as they were caught on surveillance tape tailgating another vehicle onto the premises of a Miami-area condominium and snapping a photo of the U.S. source's car and license plate — ignoring instructions not to take any pictures but just jot down the vehicle's location.

As part of a plea agreement announced Tuesday in Miami federal court, prosecutors recommended a four year sentence for Cabrera on a single charge of acting in the U.S. on behalf of a foreign government without notifying the U.S. attorney general. He will be sentenced on May 17.

The bizarre tale of Cabrera's botched intelligence mission began in 2019 when his Russian wife and her two daughters traveled from Germany to Russia to take care of a bureaucratic matter. When the woman tried to return to Germany she was not allowed to depart, an FBI agent said in an affidavit accompanying the original indictment.

Cabrera then traveled to Russia to see his family and was allegedly contacted by a Russian official he had met years earlier in a professional capacity. The individual, who is not identified in court filings, advised Cabrera that his family shouldn't travel to Europe or seek a U.S. visa.

It was around this time that Cabrera began to believe the individual worked for Russia's FSB intelligence agency, according to the FBI.

Later, at a subsequent meeting in Moscow, the same official produced old emails from Cabrera's account in which the Mexican scientist appeared to be scouting for real estate in Miami.

The Russian official brought up Cabrera's family situation and told him, "We can help each other," according to the original indictment.

At the official's direction, Cabrera traveled to Miami and, using an associate's name, rented an apartment in the same complex where the U.S. government source was living.

It's not clear if the scientist knew why the Russians wanted him to rent the apartment, but frequently intelligence agents seek to insulate themselves by recruiting other people to carry out various tasks. Rarely does the recruit have full knowledge of the entire mission.

The individual Cabrera was trailing is not named in court papers and is described only as a U.S. government "confidential human source" who previously provided information regarding Russian intelligence activities affecting U.S. national security interests.

Prior to his arrest, Cabrera worked in Singapore as an associate professor at a medical school jointly run by Duke University and the National University of Singapore.

He also was appointed director in 2018 of the FEMSA Biotechnology Center at the Monterrey Institute of Technology in northern Mexico, which said he earned doctorates in molecular microbiology in Russia and molecular cardiology in Germany.

In his hometown of El Espinal, in the southern state of Oaxaca, Cabrera is something of a local hero, remembered for his work to promote scientific research, heal those suffering from diabetes and assist in the rebuilding of homes after devastating earthquakes.

	<p>“It is very strange for this to happen because he is a very altruistic person with a lot of social conscience. He helped people and all this seems strange,” town Mayor Hazael Matus told The Associated Press shortly after his arrest. “We don’t know what happened, but I bet it is a confusion or an attack for scientific reasons. He may have discovered something that upset some people or some business interests.”</p>
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HEADLINE	02/15 Texas: 2 deputies injured in shootout
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/wireStory/suspect-dead-deputies-wounded-shootout-texas-82918465
GIST	<p>KATY, Texas -- Two Texas sheriff deputies were shot and wounded Tuesday after exchanging gunfire with a suspect who was struck and killed, authorities said.</p> <p>Harris County Sheriff Ed Gonzalez said the incident happened Tuesday night in Katy, Texas, about 30 miles (48 kilometers) west of Houston. Gonzalez said via Twitter that both officers were hospitalized with what appeared to be non-life-threatening injuries.</p> <p>According to Gonzalez, the deputies responded to the scene after receiving reports of shots being fired. When deputies arrived, Gonzalez said, the suspect shot at the deputies and the deputies returned fire. The deputies were hit and the suspect was declared dead at the scene.</p> <p>Chief Deputy Edison Toquica said during a news conference Tuesday night that the original call for service, by an occupant of the home, was at 8 p.m. and was regarding a discharge of firearms within the residence.</p> <p>Toquica said one of the deputies was struck in the right leg. The other deputy was struck in the leg and also grazed in the head and left ear.</p> <p>“We’re blessed that both of them are in stable condition,” Toquica said.</p> <p>He did not identify the deputies but said they were 27 and 28 years old and that one had been on the force for one year and the other for two.</p> <p>"Law enforcement is part of the community. Our kids go to school with your kids. We go to the same church, we shop at the same grocery store. So this is a time that we have to stand shoulder to shoulder and work together towards curbing the violent crime that we’re seeing,” Toquica said.</p> <p>Of the suspect, Toquica said, “We’re being advised that he is a paranoid schizophrenic at this time. That hasn’t been 100 percent confirmed. Of course, all of this information is preliminary, but that is what we’ve been advised as of this point.”</p> <p>The unidentified suspect was about 43-years-old and was out of jail on bond for the 2020 aggravated assault of a family member, Toquica said, but it was not clear what led to police being called to the home on Tuesday.</p> <p>The shooting is still under investigation, he said.</p>
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